

LIVING BULWARK

The online magazine of The Sword of the Spirit
sources of strength and renewal for Christian life and mission in today's world

August/September 2013 - Vol. 69



The Living Word of God

"The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12)

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Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.

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The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



The Unity of the Scriptures

edited by Don Schwager

Unity of the Old and New Testaments

Christians recognize the Old Testament (Jewish Scriptures) and the New Testament as one book, commonly called the Bible or Holy Scriptures. Both the Old and New Testaments are divinely inspired by one and the same Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16). Kallistos Ware, a biblical scholar and Orthodox bishop, states succinctly,

We believe that the Scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative Witness to God's revelation of Himself – in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and the whole history of salvation. And as such they express the word of God in human language. While divinely inspired, the Bible is also humanly expressed. It is a whole library of different books written at varying times by distinct persons. Each book of the Bible reflects the outlook of the age in which it was written and the particular viewpoint of the author. For God does nothing in isolation, divine grace cooperates with human freedom. God does not abolish our individuality but enhances it. And so it is in the writing of inspired Scripture. Alongside the divine aspect, there is also a human element in Scripture. We are to value both.

Alongside this human element, however, we see always the divine element. These are not simply books written by individual human writers. We hear in Scripture not just human words,

marked by a greater or lesser skill and perceptiveness, but the eternal, uncreated Word of God Himself, the divine Word of salvation.

– from *The Orthodox Study Bible*, 2008

The New and Old Testaments are intimately linked together. Over one third of the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament. Jesus stated unequivocally, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but fulfil them” (Matthew 5:17). The New Testament does not replace the Old – rather it unveils and brings into full light the hidden meaning and signs which foreshadow and point to God’s plan of redemption which he would accomplish through his Son, Jesus Christ.

New hidden in the Old – Old unveiled in the New

A very common expression, dating back to the early beginnings of the Christian church, states that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New – the two shed light on each other. The Old Testament prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ who came not only to redeem the people of Israel but the whole world as well.

All Scripture describes the coming of the Lord. The New Testament is hidden in the Old; the Old Testament is brought to light in the New. Those who are unspiritual have always failed to see this hidden meaning. Yet even before Christ those who were spiritual could find the Words of God hidden in the words of the prophets, and so through this understanding could be set free.

– Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430 AD)

There are a number of symbols and events in the Old Testament that foreshadow and point to the coming of Christ and his saving mission. When interpreted correctly they can also shed light on the significance of what Christ has done for us. For example, when the people of Israel were saved from death by passing through the waters of the parted Red Sea, the early Christians saw in this Exodus event a symbol of the “new birth” and “regeneration” through the waters of baptism that cleansed us from sin, and delivered us from death to new life in Christ, thus making us a new creation in Christ and co-heirs with Christ in the promises of a restored Paradise and New Jerusalem – the city of heavenly glory where we will dwell with God in his everlasting kingdom of peace and righteousness.

Jesus, in a number of places recorded in the Gospels, refers to the Old Testament figures and signs, such as Jonah (Matthew 12:39), Solomon (Matthew 12:42), the Temple (John 2:19), the brazen serpent of Moses in the wilderness (John 3:14) that pointed to himself and to his work of redemption.

How to read the Scriptures

From these examples, we can hopefully see two important truths for how Christians ought to read the Scriptures. The New Testament must be read in the light of the Old Testament, and the Old Testament must be read in the light of Christ’s saving death and resurrection.

In the beginning

Another example of how the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and how the Old is unveiled in the New Testament can be seen by reading both the first chapter of the Book of Genesis and the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Genesis 1 describes the work of creation involving the Spirit of God, the Word of God which was spoken, and the eternal Father who breathed the “breath of life” into Adam, making him a “living soul” and son after God’s likeness and image.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth... And the *Spirit of God* was hovering over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1,3).

Then God *said* [*the word of God*], “Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness (Genesis 1:26)... Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground, and *breathed* into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul (Genesis 2:7).

Why did God speak in the plural (*let us make man in our image*) when he created humankind in his image? The Gospels reveal a Trinity of Persons perfectly united in the one Godhead – the eternal Father, the only-begotten Son (who is the eternal Word of God), and the Holy Spirit. John’s Gospel, chapter one, brings out the hidden meaning in the Genesis account of creation.

In the beginning was the *Word*, and the Word was *with God*, and the Word *was God*. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made (John 1:1-3).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the *only begotten Son from the Father* (John 1:14).

And John bore witness, “I saw the *Spirit* descend as a dove from heaven and remain on him [Christ]”(John 1:32).

The New Testament revelation sheds light on God’s work of creation and on how God determined to restore and fulfil his plan after Adam’s disobedience and the downfall of the human race. God sent his only-begotten Son who takes on human flesh for our salvation. The Lord Jesus is both fully God – the eternal Word of God, and fully man – conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary who bore him (Luke 1:26-35), and anointed by the same Holy Spirit (Luke 3:22) to carry out the eternal Father’s plan of redemption and restoration through his death and resurrection.

Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ

From the beginning of the early church to the present, Christians have understood the importance of personally encountering the Risen Lord Jesus in and through the living and active Word of God in the Scriptures.

Jerome (347-420 AD), an early church Bible scholar who translated the entire Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek texts into the common language of his day (Latin), said that “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

You are reading [the Scriptures]? No. Your betrothed is talking to you. It is your betrothed, that is, Christ, who is united with you. He tears you away from the solitude of the desert and brings you into his home, saying to you, “Enter into the joy of your Master.”

In the Bible it is God who speaks to us

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), a German Lutheran pastor and theologian, who wrote extensively and preached widely from the Scriptures on the centrality of the cross of Christ and on ethical demands of the Gospel message, paid the ultimate price with his life when he was imprisoned and executed by the Nazi regime in 1945. His writings and the witness of his life and martyrdom continue to have significant influence on generations of Christians – Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox – throughout the Christian world. In a letter

he wrote in 1936 to Dr. Rudiger Schleicher, his brother-in-law and close friend, he explains his approach to the reading of the Bible:

One cannot simply read the Bible the way one reads other books... That is because in the Bible it is God who speaks to us... If it is I who say where God will be, I will always find there a God who in some way corresponds to me, is agreeable to me, fits in with my nature. But if it is God who says where he will be, then that will truly be a place that at first is not agreeable to me at all, that does not fit so well with me. That place is the cross of Christ. And whoever will find God there must draw near to the cross in the manner that the Sermon on the Mount requires. That does not correspond to our nature at all; it is, in fact, completely contrary to it. But this is the message of the Bible, not only the New Testament but also the Old (Isaiah 53!). In any case, Jesus and Paul understand it in this way – that the cross of Jesus fulfils the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The entire Bible, then, is the Word in which God allows himself to be found by us. Not a place that is agreeable to us or makes sense to us a priori, but instead a place that is strange to us and contrary to our nature. Yet, the very place in which God has decided to meet us.

(translation from the German by David Mcl. Gracie, *Meditating On the Word*)

Encountering the face of Christ

In our own present day many Christians are witnessing a renewed interest and rediscovery of the great treasure and power of God's Word in the Scriptures. Benedict XVI [Joseph Ratzinger], who has devoted his life to the study of the Scriptures and to the biblical teaching of the early church fathers, has written extensively on the importance of encountering the 'face of Christ' in the profound and intimate unity of the Scriptures:

Christian tradition has often placed the Divine Word made flesh on a parallel with the same word made book. This is what emerges already in the creed when one professes that the Son of God "was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man", but also a profession of faith in the same "Holy Spirit, who spoke through the Prophets".... as Saint Ambrose affirms (*In Lucam* VI, 33) – and clearly declares: "For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took to himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men" (*Dei Verbum* 13)...

In this rediscovered harmony, the face of Christ will shine in its fullness and will help us to discover another unity, that profound and intimate unity of Sacred Scriptures... "At many moments in the past and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our time, the final days, he has spoken to us in the person of his Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2). Christ thus retrospectively sheds his light on the entire development of salvation history and reveals its coherence, meaning, and direction.

- Benedict XVI, Address on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," October 2008

Reading the Scriptures spiritually

In conclusion, it is important that when we read and study the Old and New Testament passages of the Bible, we must be very attentive to the unity and the content of the whole Scripture. It is also important that we learn to discern the full sense of Scripture both in its *literal* and *spiritual* senses together. Hence, the importance of learning how to both read Scripture *prayerfully* and *interpret* it *spiritually* – through the help and guidance of

the Holy Spirit.

[Don Schwager is a member of [The Servants of the Word](#) and author of the [Daily Scripture Reading and Meditation](#) website.]

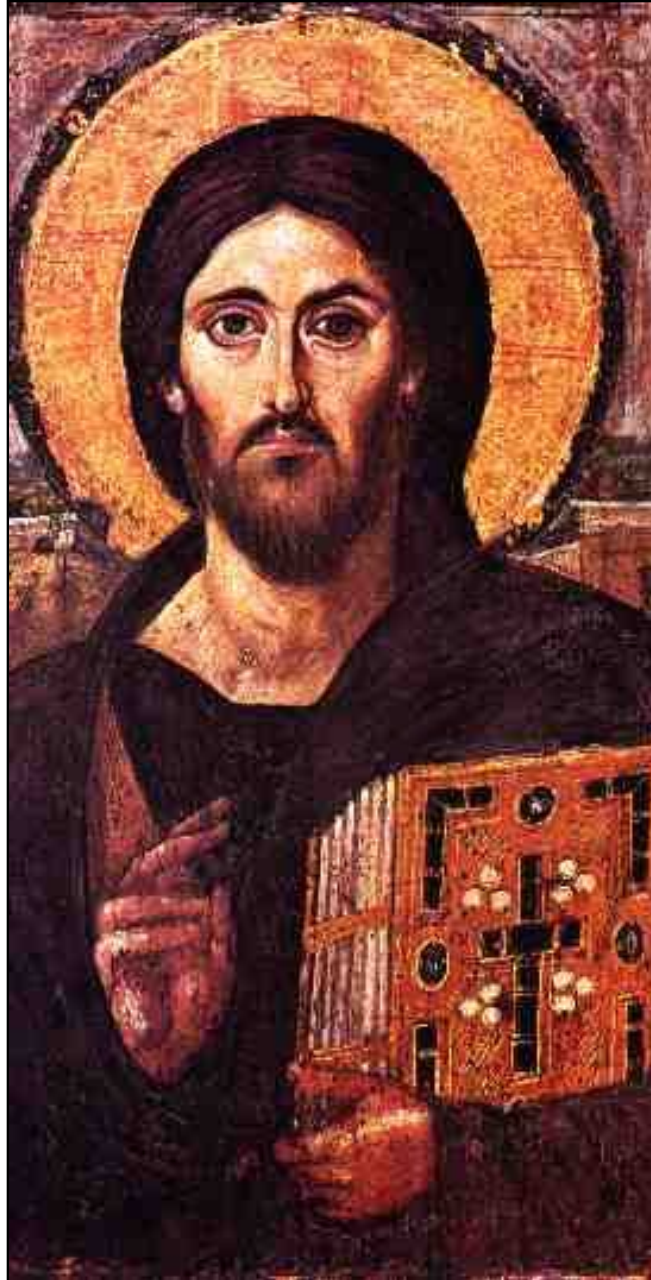
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The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



The Scriptures Are One Book in Christ

The Spirit of Christ present in the Old Testament

“[Christ's words] are not only those which he spoke when he became a man and tabernacled in the flesh; for before that time, Christ, the Word of God, was in Moses and the prophets... [their words] were filled with the Spirit of Christ.”

– Origen of Alexandria, Bible scholar and teacher (184-254 AD)

The hidden meaning of Christ's coming

All Scripture describes the coming of the Lord. The New Testament is hidden in the Old; the Old Testament is brought to light in the New. Those who are unspiritual have always failed to see this hidden meaning. Yet even before Christ those who were spiritual could find the Words of God hidden in the words of the prophets, and so through this understanding could be set free.

– Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430 AD)

The Scriptures Are Singing of Christ

“You recall that one and the same Word of God extends throughout Scripture, that it is one and the same Utterance that resounds in the mouths of all the sacred writers, since he who was in the beginning with God has no need of separate syllables; for he is not subject to time... In any passage you care to choose, the Scriptures are singing of Christ, provided we have ears that can pick out the tune. The Lord opened the minds of the Apostles so that they understood the Scriptures. That he will open our minds too is our prayer.”

– Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430 AD)

Christ foreshadowed in the Old Testament

“Every part of Holy Scripture announces through words the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, reveals it through facts and establishes it through examples... For it is our Lord who during all the present age, through true and manifest foreshadowings, generates, cleanses, sanctified, chooses, separates, or redeems the Church in the Patriarchs, through Adam's slumber, Noah's flood, Melchizedek's blessing, Abraham's justification, Isaac's birth, and Jacob's bondage.”

– Hilary, bishop of Poitiers (300-368 AD)

God has said everything in his Word

“In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word – and he has no more to say... because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All Who is His Son.

Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely upon Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty.”

– John of the Cross (1542-1591 AD)

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Christ in All the Scriptures

The Long Common Thread of Christological Interpretation

by Dr. John Yocum

What a difference a century makes when it comes to interpreting the Bible. A hundred years ago, as G. W. H. Lampe has pointed out,¹ the English reader of the Bible took for granted that the imprecatory (“cursing”) psalms (e.g., Psalm 58) applied to the enemies of Israel, and so to those of the Church, and to the spiritual enemies that assail the individual Christian in temptation. He knew that in the Song of Songs Christ addressed the Church, wooed her, and made her beautiful by virtue of the love for her that led him to the Cross. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah was, of course, Christ himself. These views were shared by most Christians regardless of denomination.

But now we are told that the imprecatory psalms are not suitable for Christians, because, in light of Jesus’ command to love our enemies, they manifest a sub-Christian attitude of vengeance. And is not the Song of Songs best read as what it most simply appears to be: an erotic love poem? To spiritualize it is to miss its wholesome, earthy message. Finally, the Servant Songs of Isaiah do not really speak of Christ, but of Israel, or

perhaps of the prophet himself and his sufferings.

We also now use “study Bibles” in which the Old Testament is cross-referenced in the New Testament, but New Testament citations are absent from the Old Testament. We are told, both directly and more subtly, that it is not quite kosher to find Christ in the Old Testament, especially where the New Testament does not explicitly apply a particular passage from the Old Testament to a New Testament reality.

Christ the Cornerstone

The christological interpretation of the Old Testament, however, is not expendable. It is the foundation of the Christian attitude to the Bible and the New Testament’s understanding of the Old Testament. It is the normative, unitive, and uniquely biblical hermeneutic,² by which the Old and New Testaments are fused into a single book with a coherent message.

Christological interpretation is normative in that some form of this species of interpretation has characterized Christian biblical interpretation since the first century, despite the modern challenge to this norm by the historical-critical method, first in the academic world, and recently even on a popular level, as the historical-critical method influences culture.³

Christological interpretation is also unitive in that it binds together the Old and New Testaments—both of which are made up of diverse literary material—into a single Bible that can be published between two covers as something more than an anthology.⁴

This biblical hermeneutic is also unique in that there is nothing else like it in all the world of literature.⁵ This is apparent even to secular literary critics, who often view the Bible in a more sober and reasonable way than the enlightened purveyors of a pure historical-critical method. For the Christian, to lose such a reading of the Old Testament is to lose much of this capacity to have his heart and his perception of the world shaped by the Word of God spoken to his people in every age.

Two Testaments, One Bible

The New Testament claims a continuity with the Old. The God of the people of Israel and the God who has made himself known in Christ are one and the same. Christ is understood in the context of the revelation of God to his people beginning in the Old Covenant. In 1 Cor. 15:3–5, Paul sets out the basic lines of the tradition handed on to him:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (RSV)

The phrase “in accordance with the Scriptures” occurs twice, in order to underline the assertion that all this is in fulfillment of the plan of God, his action, and his promise, as set out in the Old Testament. The same thrust appears in Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, which centers around Joel 2, Psalm 11 and Psalm 110: Christ’s death and resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit are a fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament.⁶

Perhaps the most important single presentation of the Old Testament as a “context of understanding” is Luke 24:44–47, in which Jesus responds to the disciples’ puzzlement over the events they’ve witnessed: 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.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

It was through the understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures that the disciples came to understand the person and work of Christ.⁷ The quotations of the Old Testament are not simply used to back up a prior understanding—they create understanding. Yet, while the Old Testament establishes the framework for understanding Christ, Christ is also the interpretative key to the Old Testament. Leonhard Goppelt sees Luke 24:27 and 24:45 as, on the one hand, a frame of reference for understanding Christ in light of the Old Testament, and on the other, an interpretive key to the Old Testament.⁸ Paul portrays the Jews as having a veil over their eyes when they read the Law, “but when a man turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (2 Cor. 3:16). To read the Old Testament with understanding is to read it as fulfilled in Christ. Indeed, Christ himself was present in the life of the people of Israel, as Paul makes clear:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (1 Cor. 10:1–4)

Biblical Types & Narrative

Paul goes on to say that what happened to the people of Israel was the genuine contemporary action of God, but that those events are recorded in the Scripture as “warnings” (RSV) or “patterns” or “types” (*tupoi*) for us on whom the end of the ages has come. The history of God’s dealings with men have reached their climax in the age of the New Covenant. The history of the people of Israel is a pattern for God’s dealings with the Church of this New Covenant. The Old Testament sets up a temporal horizon of understanding, a framework of history over which God rules, and within which his revelation or purpose may be achieved.⁹ This understanding is found not only in Paul, (“when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son. . . .” [Gal. 4:4]), but also in other New Testament writers. One notices the recurrence in the New Testament of such phrases as “in these last days” (Heb. 1:1), “it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18), etc.

This much is apparent even to secular literary critics. There is broad agreement that the New Testament itself takes a temporally based interpretative approach to the Old Testament. This approach is commonly called “typological,” from the Greek word *tupos*, by which the New Testament designates people, institutions, and events in the Old Testament as “types,” or patterns, of realities that are fully revealed in the New Covenant, as Paul does in 1 Cor. 10:6. (Cf. Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 10:11; 1 Pet. 3:21.)

Even where this terminology is not insisted upon, there is still an underlying notion of a temporal progression from the Old Testament realities to their fulfillment in Christ. Speaking strictly as a literary critic, Northrop Frye frankly states:

This typological way of reading the Bible is indicated too often and too explicitly in the New Testament for us to be in any way in doubt that this is the “right” way of reading it—“right” in the only sense that criticism can recognize, as the way that conforms to the intentionality of the book itself and to the conventions it assumes and requires.¹⁰

It would seem reasonable, then, if one accepts the New Testament as authoritative, that one would read the Old Testament in this typological framework, not only as the “right” way in the literary-critical sense, but also as the true interpretation of the history of God’s dealings with his

people.

Calvin, an Exemplar

The reading of the Old Testament in christological perspective was the normative Christian approach up until sometime in the eighteenth century. Hans Frei has shown in his magisterial work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, that the era of biblical interpretation preceding the rise of eighteenth-century rationalism was characterized by a reading of the whole Bible as a narrative of salvation. This narrative, since it rendered the world as it actually is, embraced the experience of any age and any reader. The reader fit his life and his experience into the biblical narrative, both by typological interpretation and by his manner of life.¹¹ This narrative reading is not all there is to reading the Bible as a Christian, but the conviction that the Bible tells the true story of the human race, in which God has personally and decisively intervened, serves as a foundation for all else.

Frei's study is important in that it takes John Calvin (1509–1564) as an exemplar of the precritical tradition. Calvin is a pivotal figure in the history of biblical interpretation, important for discerning points of agreement in the precritical approach to the Bible. He came upon the scene when the humanist renaissance in language and literature was in full flower, and, in vigorous reaction to the theological teaching of the Schools, demanded a new approach to the relationship between study of the Bible and doctrine. He was a leading figure in the Protestant Reformation, which denied scriptural warrant for the authority of the pope, the sacrament of confession, and many other doctrines. He stood for a new relationship between the secular and ecclesiastical powers, based on principles derived from biblical exegesis. Calvin is thus rightly identified with a radical change in the order of Christendom and with tumult and reform in Western theology.

Yet, as a biblical exegete, Calvin—Protestant Reformer, humanist, and standard-bearer for change—is more akin to his Roman Catholic and Lutheran opponents in outlook and presuppositions than to the historical critics who emerged later in the Protestant tradition.¹² Calvin stands in a broad tradition that holds to the divine authority of Scripture, which, when interpreted under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reveals the historical plan of God to bring about redemption in Christ, a plan consummated in the coming of the New Jerusalem, and worked out in the life of every individual believer. This outlook is evident in his treatment of Old Testament figures that the New Testament does not explicitly cite as types...

Finding the Voice of Christ

This christological mentality allows Calvin to see Christ throughout the Psalms and to apply the Psalms to New Testament realities. Calvin applies this principle to one of the Psalter's starkest imprecatory psalms in his preface to Psalm 109:

... although David here complains of injuries which he sustained, yet as he was a typical character, everything that is expressed in the Psalm must properly be applied to Christ, the Head of the Church, and to all the faithful inasmuch as they are his members; so that when unjustly treated and tormented by their enemies, they may apply to God for help, to whom vengeance belongs.³³

Similarly, not only are the grace, beauty and virtue of Solomon, and the riches of his kingdom are described in Psalm 45, but also

At the same time, there can be no doubt, that under this figure the majesty, wealth and extent of Christ's kingdom are described and illustrated by appropriate terms, to teach the faithful that there is no felicity greater or more desirable than to live under the reign of this king, and to be

subject to his government.³⁴

Calvin's preface to Olivetan's New Testament is a striking example of his christocentric attitude to the Scripture. He views a number of characters as figures of Christ, who are not explicitly so interpreted in the New Testament—Isaac, Joseph, Jacob, Solomon, Samson. The whole of the Old Testament is viewed as finding its fulfillment, directly or indirectly, in Christ:

For, this is eternal life; to know one, only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He has sent, whom he has established as the beginning, the middle and the end of our salvation. He [Christ] is Isaac, the beloved son of the Father who was offered as a sacrifice, but nevertheless did not succumb to the power of death. He is Jacob, the watchful shepherd, who has such great care for the sheep which he guards. He is the good and compassionate brother Joseph, who in his glory was not ashamed to acknowledge his brothers, however lowly and abject their condition. He is the great sacrificer and bishop Melchizedek, who has offered an eternal sacrifice once for all. He is the sovereign lawgiver Moses, writing his law on the tables of our hearts by his Spirit. He is the faithful captain and guide Joshua, to lead us to the Promised Land. He is the victorious and noble king David, bringing by his hand all rebellious power to subjection. He is the magnificent and triumphant king Solomon, governing his kingdom in peace and prosperity. He is the strong and powerful Samson, who by his death has overwhelmed all his enemies. . . . This is what we should in short seek in the whole of Scripture: truly to know Jesus Christ, and the infinite riches that are comprised in him and are offered to us by him from God the Father. If one were to sift through the whole Law and the Prophets, he would not find a single word which would not draw and bring us to him.

Furthermore, Calvin is able to cite an allegory with approbation.

The allegory of Ambrose on this passage is not displeasing to me. Jacob, the younger brother, is blessed under the person of the elder; the garments which were borrowed from his brother breathe an odour grateful and pleasant to his father. In the same manner, we are blessed, as Ambrose teaches, when, in the name of Christ, we enter the presence of our Heavenly Father: we receive from Him the robe of righteousness, which, by its odour, procures his favour; in short, we are thus blessed when we are put in his place.³⁵

Calvin's typological reading of the Bible has been vindicated on literary grounds, as Frye demonstrates. But there is more here. The exhortation above is a manifestation of a religious attitude. The reader of the Scripture, while attending to the grammatical structure of the text, the literal meaning of the words, does not function simply as a human interpreter. As the spiritual man reads the Scripture, the Holy Spirit moves in his heart so as to render to him the pattern of his dealings with the world.³⁶ Calvin does not simply read the Bible as a text; he hears in it a Voice.³⁷ He is convinced that Christ is to be sought in the whole Bible, and that he who seeks, finds.

The Implications of Christ in All the Scriptures

These observations are not meant to demonstrate that there was a precritical hermeneutic that was wholly unified in its approach to christological interpretation. There are admittedly differences in emphasis between Calvin's approach and the approach that underlies the "proto-evangelium," for example. We can, however, see the gulf that divides even Calvin from the modern historical-critical approach. That gulf separates those who take a fundamentally christological approach to the Bible, seeing it as intended by its divine Author to speak to men in every age of Christ, and those who see christological interpretation as something tacked onto the text,

perhaps with impressive creativity and skill, by the New Testament authors and by later exegetes.

The implications of a christological approach to the whole Bible are broad and deep. Its significance may be sketched out in at least three areas: spirituality, culture, and ecumenism, the last albeit only briefly. The importance of a christocentric mentality for spirituality is especially striking in relation to the Psalms. Scholarly discussion of the Psalms over the last seventy-five years has centered on theories concerning their *Sitz im Leben* (i.e., their original setting in the life and worship of the Hebrews). This is an important question insofar as it touches on the history of Israel and its cult and contributes to an intelligent reading of the Old Testament as history. Yet, the Psalms are prayers—that is their literary genre—and this must be taken into account in interpreting them. All historical hypotheses must be tentative, reflecting an awareness that the documents in question are not written as religious history, but as dialogues.³⁸ It follows from this that a christological reading restores to the Psalms their existential significance. For the purpose of prayer, the original *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm is well-nigh irrelevant; one must not so much enter the mind of the original psalmist, as learn to make the psalm one's own. Indeed, the value of the Psalms as prayers lies in their applicability to an almost infinite variety of human situations.

Furthermore, if a Christian is to sincerely pray the Psalms, he must do so as a Christian. A twentieth-century Norwegian Baptist cannot pray as a sixth-century–B.C. Israelite. Some kind of analogy is required. The land for a Christian has the same significance that it had for an Israelite: security, provision, and identity. Yet, the Christian prays Psalm 37, for example, with a clearer prospect of the reception of those gifts in the age to come, when “the meek shall inherit the earth.” This christocentric framework has enabled Christians throughout the centuries to sincerely pray even the imprecatory psalms, knowing that, while the Israelite who first prayed Psalm 137 may have applied it to the hated Babylonians, one may pray this same psalm, with full sincerity, in the light of the Sun of Righteousness, against the evil inclinations of his own flesh—an enemy just as real, and far more deadly than the might of Babylon.

A Reading of Scripture for All Christians

The mentality that undergirds this kind of prayer has been transmitted through Christian culture built upon a christological, narrative reading of the Bible.³⁹ This mentality, while perhaps not sufficient to allow for the full expression of the traditional “spiritual interpretation,” is necessary to it. The fundamental conviction of the Christian is that God has acted in history and has come to us in Christ. One must accept the biblical story in its fullness as the story of our world, of my world, in order for spiritual interpretation to be genuine, and not simply a literary game. George Lindbeck has noted the decline of narrative Bible reading and its coincidence with the erosion of a common mind in the Church.⁴⁰ The traditional narrative/typological/spiritual reading of Scripture is unitive. It is a myth, in the anthropological sense of the term: a story that explains the world and forms the worldview of a people, among whom it is passed on.

Now, the power of a myth is in proportion to its acceptance as a depiction of reality. Carl Amerding has pointed out that the story that the Bible tells gives its own indications that it is meant to depict actual events—to be taken seriously, accepted as a true depiction of reality, it must be seen to have some relation to actual historical events. In Amerding's view, that they took place, and are typically related, is the claim of the Bible itself.⁴¹ To carry the weight of conviction, the typological, and thus the christological, reading of the Bible must be rooted in faith that the central events the Bible narrates—Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, and the central events of the history of Israel in their general outlines—actually took place. The tools of historical-critical method cannot be ignored, but must, rather, be employed in an even-handed way that does not blithely dismiss the extraordinary, or indeed the miraculous, and remains aware of its own limitations.⁴²

Thus, a new synthesis is demanded, one which unites modern historical-critical tools, literary alertness to the

Bible's self-interpretation, and systematic theology in a way that feeds spiritual life. As Joseph Ratzinger [Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI] has put it:

The time seems to have arrived for a new and thorough reflection on exegetical method. Scientific exegesis must recognize the philosophic element present in a great number of its ground rules, and it must then reconsider the results which are based on these rules. . . . What we need now are not new hypotheses on the *Sitz im Leben*, on possible sources, or on the subsequent process of handing down the material. What we do need is a critical look at the exegetical landscape we now have, so that we may return to the text, and distinguish between those hypotheses which are helpful and those which are not. Only under these conditions can a new and fruitful collaboration between exegesis and systematic theology begin. And only in this way will exegesis be of real help in understanding the Bible.⁴³

Such a new synthesis may yield both greater interest in the study of the Old Testament, (a field the critical issue for which, as Amerding has suggested, is, "Is anybody listening?")⁴⁴ and greater conviction about what C. S. Lewis described as "a myth that really happened."

Thus, a return to christocentric interpretation means a return to the text as it understands itself; to the Bible as the primary source of dogma (as both Reformers and their predecessors held); to an exegesis built on faith; and to a reading of the Bible aimed at nourishing spiritual life.⁴⁵

The current climate is a far different one than that in which the sixteenth-century polemic occurred, and far more conducive to perceiving the common assumptions and approaches that both Roman Catholics and Protestants brought to their debates.⁴⁶ The call for a postmodern hermeneutic of faith comes from quarters as diverse as the Tyndale Fellowship, the Evangelical Orthodox Church, and the Cardinal Prefect of the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In this enterprise, the dividing lines may no longer separate Roman Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox from one another, but separate those who approach the Bible with trust from those who follow "a radical hermeneutic of suspicion."⁴⁷ That can only be a happy prospect for the rebuilding of Christian unity and culture.

This article is excerpted from the article, "Christ in All the Scriptures," by Dr. John Yocum, which appeared in the March/April 1998 issue of Touchstone Magazine. Used with Permission.

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Notes:

1. G. W. H. Lampe, "The Reasonableness of Typology" in G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woolcombe, *Essays In Typology* (Studies In Biblical Theology, vol. 22) London: SCM Press, 1956, p. 9.
2. "Hermeneutic" here is used in its broad sense, of the whole process of understanding, or to use Schleiermacher's term, "the art of understanding," as applied not only to the linguistic matter of the text, but also to the import of it. Gerhard Ebeling, "Hermeneutics," translated by Charles McCullough from *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1959, v. 3, 242–262. Raymond Brown, "Hermeneutics" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, p. 1147.
3. Hans Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in *The Bible And*

Narrative Tradition, Frank McConnell ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. See G. W. H. Lampe, "The Reasonableness of Typology" for a lucid description of the signal change that has come upon, not only the academic world, but the whole of Christian culture since the rise of biblical criticism.

4. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. xii–xiii.

5. Frye, p. 80. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952, p. 16 and passim. The observations of these two authors are especially interesting and important, because they are approaching the Bible as literary critics, not as theologians. They have no prior commitment to a particular "biblical theology"—nor are they seeking to establish one. They base their conclusions on what they see in the text itself as a literary work.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: Die typologische Deutung des alten Testaments im Neuen*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliches Buchgesellschaft, 1981, p. 237.

9. D. Moody Smith, "The Pauline Literature" in *Scripture Citing Scripture. Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars*, D.A. Carson and H. G.M. Williamson, eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 287.

10. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 80. Cf. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 16.

11. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study In Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, ch. 2.

12. T. H. L. Parker sees three main streams among the various sixteenth-century views of the Old Testament. He groups the Reformers and Roman Catholics together, in opposition to both the freethinkers and Anabaptists. The second group were a small minority, but Calvin sees them as the main threat in some of his commentaries. (T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986, p. 44.) Yet, because of their emphasis on the investigation of the author's intention, and the use of what we would now term "critical tools," many see the Reformers as the forerunners of historical-, form-, and redaction-critics. (Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, London: Harper/Collins, 1992, p. 158.)

13. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1874, vol. 1, p. 170. (Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from Calvin's commentaries are taken from *Calvin's Commentaries*, James Anderson, tr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949.)

14. *Ibid.*

15. Thiselton, p. 158.

16. *Ibid.* Manlio Simonetti claims that in order to understand the allegorical interpretative method among the Greeks, it is important to recognize the prestige of Homer's works, so great that divine origins were attributed to him. Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, John A. Hughes, tr., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994.

17. Simonetti, pp. 6–7. Robert Grant, *David Tracey, A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, p. 160.

18. Henri de Lubac, *The Sources Of Revelation*, (*L'Ecriture dans la tradition*) Luke O'Neill, tr., N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1968, p. 12.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

20. The reformers were also concerned to reestablish the Scripture itself as the immediate source for theology. As G. R. Evans concludes at the end of her two-volume study, *The Language and Logic of The Bible*: "Perhaps the essential difference between the sixteenth-century view and that of the late medieval centuries is the bringing together again of speculative theology and exegesis, which had become separated for the purposes of study into two parallel tracks in the late twelfth century. After some practice Luther could use the Bible as a source-book for theological discussion, without reference to sentences or summa. This new complexion of exegesis undoubtedly contributed to the polarization of Protestant and Roman Catholic views of the nature of the enterprise which took place in the sixteenth century. Polemical treatises from either side reflect upon the assumptions and principles of the other. . . . Yet this awareness of differences covers, as we have seen, a vast bulk of common endeavour and hides from view the preponderance of common assumptions about the nature and purpose of Scripture on which apologists for both sides were in fact proceeding." G. R. Evans, *The Language And Logic of the Bible: The Road To Reformation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 158–59.

21. Not all, nor perhaps most, of the Roman opponents of the Reformers approached the debate from this angle. Peter Canisius is a notable example of one who also held that the Scripture is self-interpreting, that appeal to tradition is made only to deal with the most difficult and disputed passages, and that in that case it has primarily something of an adjudicating role. (James Broderick, *Life of St. Peter Canisius*, pp. 404–405.)

22. Calvin uses *perspicuitas* as a rhetorical term. The interpreter allows the text to become perspicuous by allowing the author's

intentions to flow from it. He uses the term “effectiveness,” much as Luther uses “perspicuity” (Thiselton, p. 185.)

23. Ibid., p. 156.

24. Ibid., p. 155.

25. Ibid., p. 179.

33. Commentaries, Psalm 109.

34. Commentaries, Psalm 45, preface.

35. Commentary on Genesis.27:27.

36. Ibid., p. 24.

37. Runia, p. 151.

38. “Dialogue” here is meant to reflect the prophetic element, by which God is the direct speaker in, for example, Psalm 89.

39. For a brilliant survey of patristic interpretation of Psalm 1, which brings this approach into high relief, cf. Chrysogonus Waddell, “A Christological Interpretation Of Psalm 1? The Psalter and Christian Prayer,” *Communio*, 22.3, 3 (Autumn 1995), pp. 502–21.

40. Lindbeck, George, “Scripture, Consensus, and Community,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, Richard John Neuhaus, ed., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989, pp. 74–101.

41. Carl E. Amerding, “Faith and Method in Old Testament Study: Story Exegesis,” in *A Pathway Into The Holy Scripture*, Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright, eds., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, pp. 31–49.

42. This raises grand issues that are well beyond the scope of this paper. Joseph Ratzinger brings out some dangers inherent in criticism that is unaware of its own prejudices, using Bultmann and Dibelius as examples. (Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, cited above.) In the field of Old Testament criticism, one might point to the likely demise of the Four-Source Hypothesis as a foundation for Old Testament study, to the increasing interest in the study of the text in its final form. One thinks also of the archaeological evidence uncovered in the last sixty years that points to a large-scale invasion of Palestine around the time the Conquest of the land would have begun: the idea of any kind of conquest had previously been dismissed as the imaginative product of later generations.

43. Ratzinger, pp. 22–23.

44. Amerding, p. 31.

45. Amerding points to the importance of two elements in exegesis: the working of the Holy Spirit in the interpreter and the use of the faculty of imagination, which, of course, is deeply affected by the attitude that the interpreter brings to the text. Amerding, pp. 37–38.

46. Evans, pp. 158–59.

47. Thiselton, p. 141.

See related articles:

- [The Unity of the Scriptures](#), An introduction by Don Schwager
- [Christ In All the Scriptures](#), by Dr. John Yocum
- [How to Read the Bible](#), by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware
- [The Authority of Scripture](#), by Steve Clark
- [The Scriptures Are One Book in Christ](#), quotes from early church fathers
- [Approaching Scripture As God's Word](#), by J.I. Packer
- [In the Bible It Is God Who Is Speaking to Us](#), by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- [You Can Understand the Bible](#), by Peter Kreeft
- [Formational Versus Informational Reading of the Scriptures](#), by M. Robert Mulholland Jr.
- [How to Silence the Scriptures](#), by Soren Kierkegaard
- [Reading the Scriptures with the Early Church Fathers](#), by Don Schwager
- [Scripture Study Course](#), by Don Schwager

The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



Christ Pantocrator (Ruler of All) - mosaic, 1148 AD, dome of Cathedral of Cefal, Palermo, Italy

The Authority of Scripture

by Steve Clark

Christians through the centuries have viewed the Scriptures as a unique book (or collection of books). They have believed that the Scriptures come from God in a way that no other book has. They have said that God is the author of Scripture and that Scripture is his word which he has spoken through human beings. If these statements are true, or even if they contain some truth, a person's approach to the Scriptures cannot be merely detached or scholarly. Each person is approaching a book which is intended to address him or her personally; in fact, it is a book in which God is addressing him or her personally.⁽¹⁾

Scripture is not simply interesting data or thought. By its very nature, it calls for a response. Therefore, the way a person talks and thinks about Scripture is itself a religious response. The approach people take to the Scripture is an important part of the way they approach God. This fact may be disguised behind phrases like "Contemporary Theories of Inspiration," "The New Hermeneutics," "A Realistic Interpretation of the Scripture," "Biblicism and Fundamentalism." But it is nonetheless true that the way people read the Scripture involves their response to God. From the Christian point of view, the question of the authority of the Scripture is a question about how to approach God himself.

Few would deny that the Scriptures teach about the roles of men and women. The question remains, however, how a person will respond to that teaching. Many people in secular society will catalog the views of scripture on this subject under such headings as "First Century Thought" or "Approaches of Pre-Industrial Cultures" or "Ideas from Great Religions." They will, in other words, file them away as interesting specimens of human thought, or even as possible examples of significant human wisdom – products, perhaps, of religious genius.⁽²⁾ However, such people will not decide that something is true on the basis that it is taught in the New Testament.

Others, who consider themselves to be Christians, will take a similar approach. They will catalog the scriptural views under headings like "Paul's Opinion" or "Primitive Christian Thought." These people will, in other words, respect the Scriptures as worthy of great attention, as important sources or data from which their opinions will be formed, as opinions which they would not want to blatantly contradict; yet they too will not hold a viewpoint or adopt an approach on the basis that it is taught in the New Testament. All of these people might give the scriptures weight, authority in the sense of something to which one should pay attention and be influenced by, but they will not give them authority in the sense of being the highest norm for their minds and lives. The position of Scripture, once ascertained, will not be automatically decisive for them.

The question of authority is concerned with Scripture as a norm or criterion for the beliefs and way of life of Christians. The scriptural teaching on the roles of men and women has a normative aspect. It involves questions of fact, but it is primarily the presentation of instructions for how Christians should conduct themselves. Even where possible facts such as God's creation of the human race as male and female for his own purposes come into the teaching on men and women, their acceptance as facts rests upon the authority of Scripture for determining the beliefs of Christians. The issue, then, is whether the Scripture ought to determine the way people think and act in the area of the roles of men and women.

The question of authority not only differs from the question of content – that is, what the Scripture teaches – but it also differs from the question of application. The Scripture could, for instance, teach a consistent approach to the roles of men and women with the highest authority, and its teaching still might turn out to be inapplicable to all peoples subsequent to the industrial revolution. It might not even be addressing the situation of modern people. Part Three of this book will treat questions of applicability. The question of authority, however, is distinct from the question of applicability. The question of authority concerns personal response.⁽³⁾

The Nature of Scriptural Authority

The traditional Christian view has been that the Scripture (both Old and New Testaments) has highest authority for the beliefs and life of Christians⁽⁴⁾. This means that Christians ought to change if they discover that their beliefs contradict those presented for acceptance by Scripture or if they discover that their way of life does not conform with that directed by Scripture.⁽⁵⁾ The word "authority" is not a traditional word to describe the Scripture.⁽⁶⁾ It is, however, commonly used in modern theological discussions of the nature of Scripture.⁽⁷⁾ To say that the Scripture has the highest "authority" in this case does not necessarily mean that there are no other authorities or that there is nothing else which also has highest authority. Some would hold, for instance, that tradition, reason, or personal revelation likewise have highest authority. In the sense used here, highest authority means that there is nothing which should cause Christians to contradict or otherwise set themselves at odds with Scripture.⁽⁸⁾

A more traditional word for describing the claim Scripture has upon the Christian is "canonical." The word "canon" means "rule" in the sense of a "yardstick" or "ruler."⁽⁹⁾ Something which is canonical is a standard for

measuring or judging something else. In this sense, the canonical Scripture is the standard against which all other opinions can be measured. If something is at odds with Scripture, it is not Christian and therefore for a Christian not true.

The authority of Scripture, in the traditional approach, is grounded in its origin. The Scripture is composed of writings which come from God.⁽¹⁰⁾ They contain the highest revelation of God and of his intentions for the human race. The Scriptures are not merely human books or collections of human opinion, although they are also these things. They are books which contain God's revelation of himself. When people deal with Scripture, they deal with God himself – the creator of the universe, the one who has all power in heaven and earth, and who knows all things. They are dealing with the one whose opinions count, whose word is automatically truth because he knows everything, and because he does not lie. God himself is a rock, and his words are faithful and true. Therefore, anyone who does not approach the Scripture with fear of the Lord either does not know what the Scriptures are or does not know who the Lord is.

There are two words which have been commonly used to describe the origin of the Scripture as from God: inspired and apostolic. The New Testament books, the part of the Scriptures with which we are primarily concerned in this book, were written by inspiration with apostolic authority and are therefore accepted as canonical for the Christian faith.

"Inspired" means that the New Testament writings are given by God.⁽¹¹⁾ They are the product of the Holy Spirit, inspiring the human authors to write these books. To make this basic point, the different approaches to scriptural inspiration do not need to be discussed.⁽¹²⁾ Here it is sufficient to say that the collection of books called Scripture are writings which have been described as inspired by God (cf. 2 Tm 3:16), meaning that they were given through the work of the Holy Spirit and can be counted on to give truths from God. Human beings actually wrote the Scriptures, and the Scriptures bear many marks of the human personalities of their authors, but these works were nonetheless written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and this inspiration guarantees their truthfulness.

"Apostolic" is a second word that is important for understanding the New Testament's origin in God. In this case it designates the way his inspiration is mediated through authoritative human beings. The New Testament has been handed down as a collection of apostolic writings. Whether this means that the writings of the New Testament were actually penned or dictated by one of the apostles is a question that is not crucial for our concerns. It suffices here to say that the term "apostolic" at least indicates that the work in question comes to us under apostolic authority; that is, it comes to us as the teaching of one of the apostles.

The apostles are the foundational authorities of the Christian church (Revelation 21:14), and the foundational authorities of Christian teaching.⁽¹³⁾ They have a unique authority, the highest authority after Christ. They were delegated by Christ to do whatever was needed to establish the Christian people after his resurrection and ascension, and that role included teaching (Matthew 28:19-20). They therefore exercised Christ's authority and did not hesitate to speak with his authority (2 Timothy 3:6-15; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2). Clement of Rome, a contemporary of the apostles and a man taught by them, summed up their position in this way: "The gospel was given to the apostles for us by the Lord Jesus Christ; and Jesus the Christ was sent from God. That is to say, Christ received his commission from God, and the apostles theirs from Christ."⁽¹⁴⁾

Reading some contemporary scholarship on Scripture leads to approaching the apostles as though they were merely early Christian thinkers, limited men like all other men. Most scholars discuss Paul as a theological thinker, or evaluate John's opinions, or reflect on the origin of Matthew's views, and so forth. To do so is

unavoidable, both because Scripture scholarship is a secular discipline, and because the human authors of Scripture did stand in human history under historical influence, and they were limited men of a particular age in history. It is sometimes helpful for a Christian to look at them in that way. But if this view dominates, one loses the Christian perspective on the apostles – namely, that they were given the foundational authority to establish the Christian people and they were delegated the authority of Christ to teach, and were often equipped with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to do so. A collection of the books that represent the apostolic teaching has therefore become the canon for the Christian people.

"Inspired" and "apostolic" have been chosen here to describe the Scripture insofar as it originates in God. They have been chosen because they are two of the most common terms used in Christian tradition for this aspect of the Scripture. Of the two, "inspired by God" is the more important term. It should, however, also be observed that the books of the Scripture were probably not received as canonical simply because their inspiration was discerned or their apostolicity was well attested. Very commonly books were eliminated because they did not teach unquestioned orthodoxy. They were discerned, in other words, on the basis of their content. That too was seen as a sign of their origin from God. The fundamental point, however, is simply that Scripture has been given the authority it has because it has been understood to be from God and to be reliable as an expression of his mind.

Sometimes this understanding of the nature of Scripture is attributed to Protestantism, while Catholicism is often said to substitute the church for the Scriptures. However, Catholic teaching on this point is no different than most Protestant teaching that holds to the authority of Scripture.⁽¹⁵⁾ Both Catholics and Protestants stand on the same ground in approaching the Scripture as authoritative truth from God. The Vatican Council II, in its Constitution on Divine Revelation (sec. 11), makes this point very clear:

The divinely revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:31; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-21; 3:15-16), they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. Thus "all Scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17, 13 Gk. text).⁽¹⁶⁾

In Catholic teaching as well as in Protestant teaching, nothing can overrule or contradict Scripture – not pope, council, inspired prophet, or great theologian.

There are many questions connected with the authority or canonical status of Scripture, not the least of them why these twenty-seven books and only these twenty-seven books are contained in our canon and should be regarded as having highest authority.⁽¹⁷⁾ Christian theologians have traditionally answered these questions in various ways. The fundamental point, however, is that we do have a canon, and the books in that canon have the highest authority for a Christian because they have been given by God through the Holy Spirit. This is a

faith position (like all faith in Christ or in his word).

Christianity is based upon the recognition of God speaking in the words of men. The acceptance of the canon is also a first principle. It determines to a great extent what someone will claim that Christianity is. If someone does not accept the New Testament as canonical, or only accepts something in the New Testament as canonical, that person will come up with a different religion. That religion may preserve some faith in Christ, and it may be properly termed "Christian" by historians or sociologists, but it will be different from traditional Christianity. The New Testament as a whole is foundational for faith in Christ.

Submission to Scripture

If the New Testament is a collection of inspired apostolic writings that are the canon, then it has the highest authority in the life of a Christian. It presents words from God, the Lord of all, and it must be believed and obeyed. To use a term from the New Testament (2 Cor 11:4), Christians must "submit" themselves to it.[\(18\)](#) They must submit their minds, indeed their whole lives, to it. That submission includes both believing it where the Scripture proclaims a fact about the Christian faith, and obeying it where the Scripture indicates the Lord's desires. Christians must respond to Scripture as something with authority in their lives, in such a way that it is enough for them to know that scripture has taught something in order to accept it and follow it. Scriptural teaching is not merely one of many opinions, viewpoints, or theologies. It is the standard against which all other opinions must be measured. If other views do not correspond, they must be rejected.

The concern here is not primarily with an intellectual position, but a question of how people should orient their lives. One can easily begin to approach Scripture as a source of opinion or a justification for different propositions, taking a stance in regard to it as a thinker who makes use of Scripture. While Christians must think about Scripture, they may not stand over it, using it for their purposes.

Approaching Scripture is approaching the Lord himself. It should be received as a message from the Lord. The appropriate attitude is one of submission – the submission that should mark any relationship with the Lord. Righteousness demands submission to the Lord.

Contemporary society, however, does not value personal submission. Rather, it teaches that the ideal, the highest position a human being can attain, is that of personal autonomy. The human being who decides for himself, who is creative, that is, who devises novel opinions or viewpoints, the human being who is "adult," taking the responsibility to make his own decisions – this is the human being who is valued.[\(19\)](#)

By contrast the ideal for a Christian is to submit totally to God, to be molded and formed by him, to desire first and foremost to be what God wants. The Christian is the servant (doulos-slave) of Jesus Christ; perhaps a voluntary servant, but a servant nonetheless (Rom 6:16-23).[\(20\)](#) He is the person whose life does not belong to himself, but who has given it completely, his mind included, to another-his Lord.

Many modern Christians have lost not only the sense of the dignity of submission to the Lord but also an understanding of how to submit. They no longer have an instinctual understanding of the importance of obedience as an aspect of personal loyalty to God, and of how obedience grows out of personal devotion to him. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." Obedience and love go together. But loving obedience is not content merely to keep the explicit commandments that are solemnly enjoined. Loving obedience also means eagerness to follow his preferences as well and to be formed by all of his desires.

Christians who show loving obedience want their lives to be formed by the Lord's desire, so that it is pleasing to him even in the smallest respects. Moreover, loving obedience is active obedience. It does not wait for the Lord to make his will known but seeks out the Lord's will. It is eager to discover where the Lord has a preference, and to follow it. Concretely, obedience means comparing one's mind and one's thinking with the Lord's mind and thinking as found in Scripture. Obedience means changing one's mind when it is not in harmony with the Scriptures and changing one's life when it is not shaped by God's desires as revealed in the Scriptures. This attitude does not deny that God can reveal his will in other ways, but it does emphasize that he has revealed his will in Scripture, and that one must at least be eager to follow what is stated there.

Christians are often tempted by a selective submission. Some scriptural teaching is very attractive to them, and they find in themselves an admiration and a willingness to submit to it. Modern Christians usually find it easier to feel enthusiastic about Christian teaching about God's fatherhood or about love of others. Some scriptural teaching, however, contradicts their desires. Some may even repulse them. To be sure, often the difficulty is genuine uncertainty about how to respond to some part of Scripture.

Often a person may know that the Scripture is saying something on a given subject, but can be uncertain how to understand or apply what is said. Despite some uncertainties, for most Christians there remains much scriptural teaching that is sufficiently clear, or could seemingly become sufficiently clear with more investigation, but which they find themselves unwilling to submit to. The genuineness of submission is tested precisely at these points. They prove that their submission is genuine, and not a mere pretense, when they submit to the Lord in something which is personally difficult and which may lose them the respect of the world around him. A Christian may be uncertain about how to submit, but should not be selective about submission.

Freedom and Rights

Some people today would dispute the notion that submission is the ideal for the Christian. They claim that such an ideal is opposed to the Christian freedom proclaimed in the Scriptures. Yet the submission being described here is closely related to true Christian freedom. Paul is the great apostle of Christian freedom, but the Christian freedom taught by Paul is not the same as the freedom extolled by modern man. For the modern mentality, freedom is the ability to set one's own standards, to submit to no person, to chart one's own course.

The freedom Paul teaches about comes in Christ and through faith in him.⁽²¹⁾ It is a freedom defined primarily in relationship to the Mosaic law. The two great epistles of Christian freedom, Galatians and Romans, are concerned with questions about the need for Gentile Christians to conform to the Mosaic law, especially in its ritual provisions. Christian freedom as taught by Paul, then, is first of all a freedom from the ritual provisions of the Mosaic law, at least for the Gentiles. But it is also a freedom from the (Mosaic) law in its entirety as the way to enter into the full relationship with God and the full status as his people. Behind this change is an understanding that the purpose of law is not to give life but to reveal sin (Romans 7:7-12). Life, relationship with God, power to live the Christian call, come through faith in Christ and through the Spirit of God given to us.

The freedom that Paul teaches is not, however, a freedom to disobey the ethical prescriptions taught in Old and New Testament alike, much less a freedom to set our standards and to submit to no one.⁽²²⁾ There was a temptation to abuse Paul's teaching in that way, but Paul understood that temptation as providing an opportunity for the flesh, that is, an opportunity to follow our own will and desires (Galatians 5:13). Paul expected freedom to operate in precisely the opposite way. It should produce an ability and a desire to live the kind of life which not only fulfills the commands of the law but which proceeds to an even more complete and demanding love. It is a freedom to submit to God and to do his will with a more perfect submission than had

existed under the law, when the commands of God were written on tablets of stone and not on the heart (2 Corinthians 3:3). It is freedom from the law, but a freedom that is meant to put us into a direct relationship of obedience to our Father as his sons and daughters (Galatians 3:23-4:7).

In fact, the same Paul who insisted so strongly on freedom could also insist strongly on obedience, and could act as a disciplinarian, commanding respect for his own authority because his authority and discipline were spiritual, conferred on him by the Lord Jesus under the New Covenant (I Corinthians 4:18-21). Freedom is another area in which contemporary man is ready to find contradictions in Paul, contradictions that never existed in Paul's mind. Here again, the contradictions are not in scriptural teaching. Rather, they arise when the scriptural texts are interpreted using a modern understanding of freedom alien to the scriptural mentality.

Submission, then, does not conflict with "freedom" in the scriptural sense. It can be undercut, however, by an approach to freedom which leads Christians to understand their lives in terms of their own rights. The discussion of the roles of men and women is often framed in a way which stresses the need to give women their rights and which urges them to claim or defend their own rights. At first, such an approach was used to claim for women basic legal protections and constitutional guarantees. Presently, it is often used to orient people toward seeking a kind of personal independence and individualism which conflict with the spirit of Christian teaching. We can often hear, for instance, that basic human rights include making one's own decisions, being independent upon reaching adulthood, expressing one's own opinions, developing one's full potential, having as much opportunity to do a particular job as anyone else. Moreover, we are sometimes told that these rights are violated not only when the government takes them away by force, but even when a group of people freely decide to establish their common life on different principles.

The term "rights" is a legal term, indicating something which gives us a claim in court. "Rights" in this sense is an ancient term, and can be found in Scripture. The broader idea of basic human rights, or of the rights of man, was formulated later in human history as a way of developing certain principles for framing the constitutions of modern states.⁽²³⁾ The origin of this approach will be discussed in Chapter Nineteen. This broader concept has much utility, especially as a protection for individuals in a pluralistic state which cannot presuppose a shared view of fundamental social and ethical questions. The term "the rights of women" is certainly appropriate in discussions about how legal protection should be given to women in contemporary society. However, when that legal rights framework is brought into a Christian discussion, it normally orients the whole discussion in a direction that is alien to the basic Christian context. It leads to a frame of mind in which people become oriented primarily to their own welfare, it leads them to even make demands on the Lord himself. In short, the legal rights framework used as a basis for a Christian discussion leads away from an attitude of submission, of eagerness to find out what the Lord is saying, and of readiness to accept and obey his will.

Legal rights, then, is not the proper basic framework for issues concerning the people of God. The "constitution" of Israel, and that of the Christian people, rests on an entirely different basis than those of modern states. The Scripture does not speak about "the rights of man." From the scriptural point of view, we have no intrinsic and inalienable rights.⁽²⁴⁾ Women have no rights, but men have no rights either. Human beings are God's creatures, totally at his disposal. In the book of Isaiah, the Lord says,

"Woe to him who strives with his Maker,
 an earthen vessel with the potter!
 Does the clay say to him who fashions it,
 'What are you making?'
 or 'Your work has no handles?'

Woe to him who says to a father,
 'What are you begetting?'
 or to a woman, 'With what are you
 in travail?' "
 Thus says the Lord,
 the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker:
 "Will you question me about my children,
 or command me concerning the work of my hands?
 I made the earth,
 and created man upon it;
 it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,
 and I commanded all their host."
 (Isaiah 45:9-12)

The "constitution" of Israel was based upon a covenant relationship between God and man, a covenant which God gave and men accepted.⁽²⁵⁾ The basic framework is not one of rights but of promises and commandments: the promises of God as to what he would do for his people if they were faithful to the covenant, and the commandments of God as to how his people should relate together and to others. The protection of "strangers" (that is, of resident aliens), for instance, was not based on "the rights of the strangers." Rather, it was based upon God's commandment to his people: "Thou shalt not oppress the stranger among you." God is a sovereign creator. His commandments are not based on rights that he must recognize, but on his own nature (including his goodness) and his purpose. His commandments express his plan for his people as an unfolding of his purpose in creating the human race. This is not to deny that often his purposes and his commandments can be understood by considering the way he created the human race. It is to deny, however, that a discussion with God can properly be conducted in terms of rights, or that a Christian's basic understanding of the roles of men and women can be. To think in those terms puts human beings in a false position, and induces them to call God to account for how he respects the rights of his creatures. The framework of a Christian discussion should simply be: What does God want for the human race? What does God want of men and women? Those who approach him in that way will be in a much better position to hear his word.

To speak so strongly of submission is not to ignore all the various problems in attempting to submit to Scripture. Scripture can be difficult to understand. It can require some effort to grasp the meaning of what the Scripture teaches about the roles of men and women. It can also take work to grasp Scripture's intention in a particular passage.

For instance, someone who approaches an instruction meant only for one situation as though it were meant for all of life would be making a significant mistake, as did the child who turned out the lights on his parents because he misunderstood the command "always turn out the lights when you leave the room." It is by no means true that someone who disagrees with the approach taken in this book must be rebellious toward God.

Many good Christians differ simply because they understand the Scripture differently. Nor is it always easy to apply the Scripture once it has been understood. The New Testament was written in a very different situation than ours, and we often do not know how to do what it says. Nevertheless, if we approach the Scripture submissively, with an eagerness to do everything that the Lord desires, we are in a much better position to solve these problems and to understand God's way. The Scripture is meant to be read in the fear of the Lord and in humility. As it says in Sirach:

Those who fear the Lord will not disobey his words,
and those who love him will keep his ways.
Those who fear the Lord will prepare their hearts
and will humble themselves before him.
(Sirach 2:15-17)

Understanding and Obeying

Submission to scripture should not be approached in a rigid or inflexible way. In the minds of many people, the term "submission to Scripture" conjures up a picture of Scripture as a huge law code, a set of commandments, in which everything is a directive. Not everything in Scripture is a commandment. The Scripture is a collection of many different types of writing. It contains commandments, but also teaching, maxims of wisdom, poetry, and what we might call disciplinary decrees.[\(26\)](#)

Some of Scripture is based upon what could be called "implied social structure." So far in this book, all these types of scriptural literature have been considered. All of Scripture is to be approached with seriousness and submissiveness. All of it is there for shaping our lives. But not all of it is intended to shape our lives in the same manner. Major mistakes can be made in approaching a poem or an ironical or hyperbolic statement as though they were laws from the Code Napoleon. A few reflections on the different types of scriptural literature should make the point clearer.

1. *The commandments in Scripture should be taken as commandments.* When the Lord says, "Thou shalt not steal," people had better not steal. Moreover, they had better not redefine "stealing" in such a way that something can be judged as acceptable under our definition, but still falls under what the Lord forbids according to his definition.

2. *There are differences among commandments.* Some commandments concern basic righteousness and must be approached with tremendous seriousness. Others are commandments of right order, commandments designed to order life in a better way. These do not have the same weight (Mt 23:23). For example, the directives about man woman subordination in Scripture are not on the same level as the Ten Commandments and cannot be treated with the same gravity. Yet recognizing different weight to different commandments does not mean that we need only obey some of them. All commandments are to be obeyed.

Some people apply a traditional distinction between faith and order to most of the New Testament teaching about the roles of men and women, holding that these roles are matters of order, and the Christian people can change matters of order whenever it chooses.[\(27\)](#) Some order can be changed, but in the New Testament, as in the better Christian teaching of all ages, matters of order or discipline can also be matters of obedience to the Lord if he is the originator of the order or if he simply stands behind the order. In fact, commandments such as that to honor one's parents could be considered as commandments of order, yet they are basic and inviolable.

3. Commandments should be taken as they were intended. Some commandments about the roles of men and women are clearly intended by the scripture to be universal for all Christians--not merely for Christians at a particular time, or in a particular situation. For instance, the directive for the wife to be subordinate to her husband and for the husband to care for his wife is a commandment for Christians as long as there is marriage. If anything in scripture should be approached as a commandment this should.

4. Submission takes on a different character when its object is teaching, prophecy, poetry, or the other genres

of scriptural writing that are not simply commands. The submissive response to a command is obedience, but the submissive response to other forms of speech is not always obedience. If, for instance, a woman were to approach the portrait of the ideal wife in Proverbs 31 as a set of commands to be obeyed, she might end up with a physical collapse.

Proverbs 31 is intended to serve as an ideal or model, not a point-by-point command. Similarly, the teaching in Scripture about Adam and Eve and God's purposes in creation is, for the most part, not easily "obeyed." Nonetheless, it is supposed to mold Christians' minds, so that they can see the area with God's vision. These genres of scriptural writing can help form the lives of those who are submissive to them, and they can mold their lives as firmly as commandments; yet submission to them is expressed differently than submission to commandments.

A special type of submission to Scripture should have a fuller consideration because of its relevance to this subject. This case concerns submission to New Testament patterns of church order. For centuries Christian theologians have studied the patterns of community or church order in the New Testament (and beyond the New Testament) to discern a pattern which they could view as authoritative for the following generations. Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and almost every group of Christians have used this method to justify the approach taken to order and government in their denominations.

Even now, few Christian theologians would say that New Testament and early church patterns have no validity as standards for Christian life today. Moreover, the early Christians themselves believed that many of their patterns of community order came to them from the Lord and that they were obliged to follow them.⁽²⁸⁾ Indeed, for Christians who still respect scriptural and traditional patterns of order and who do not feel themselves free to order the life of the Christian people however seems good to them, one of the weightiest arguments against having women as elders or ministers or priests is the argument that Christ himself chose only men for this position.

Recently, however, there has been a stress on the variety of patterns and approaches to order in the New Testament.⁽²⁹⁾ Some have correctly pointed out that the approach to ordering the life of the Christian community taken in Jerusalem in 35 A.D. and the approach taken in Corinth in 60 A.D. appear to have been somewhat different. The approach to ordering community life that we see in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch and that which we see in the Didache are likewise different in important respects. The conclusion which some draw from this observation is that different Christian communities today can take different approaches, including different approaches to such questions as the ordination of women.

The recent approach of noting variety between New Testament churches has something to recommend it. This can help avoid a "blueprint" approach to following New Testament patterns.⁽³⁰⁾ The early churches may even have approached the roles of men and women somewhat differently. As was discussed in Chapter Five, some writers have held that there was a difference between the roles of men and women in Jewish Christian communities and those roles in Gentile Christian communities, although the evidence is far too weak to make such an assertion confidently. It is possible, then, that the early Christians did have two patterns of community order for women: one which included deaconesses and active service for women, and one without these features.

The evidence that some early Christian communities were free to order their church life somewhat differently does not lead to the conclusion that Christians today can take a fundamentally different approach to men's and women's roles. First, the stress on different patterns of community order was developed in the context of trying to deal with differences in forms of church government, for example, the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and

Congregational approaches. The approach was developed, that is, for investigating an area in which few explicit scriptural directives are given, and in which Christian teachers for centuries have had to rely on tracing the pattern of how it was actually done and teaching the pattern they had traced as the correct form.

Second, the observation about the existence of different patterns in the early church only applies to certain levels of a given question. Thus, there may be something to the view that some churches had one bishop presiding over the community and others had only a presbyterate, but there is no question that some men presided over a Christian community, and that the community was expected to be subordinate to them. While differences in approach existed, there were also uniformities.[\(31\)](#)

Third, on the subject of the roles of men and women, one finds a basic uniformity of approach concerning both the husband being head of the family and the elders or heads of the community being chosen from among the men. There is no credible instance which is different or which would suggest that a different pattern might have been followed. Communities may have structured leadership roles of women differently. One community may have had an order of deaconesses, while another may have instead relied on some of the widows. One community may have had a chief deaconess, while another may not have had one. One community may have assigned a deaconess some teaching functions that another community may not have allowed. But on many points, especially the most fundamental ones, no variation can be shown. Paul can even appeal to the universal practice of the churches on the issue of headcoverings, a practice where one might expect a variety of approaches (1 Corinthians 11:16; 14:36).

Finally, and very importantly, the basic uniformity of pattern is also accompanied by the explicit directives in the New Testament both about husband-wife order and about the governors of the community being men, and the latter appears in the closest thing we have to an authoritative book of church order (1 Timothy). In short, in the area of the roles of men and women, submitting to the New Testament patterns of basic order for the roles of men and women does not entail a simplistic or overrigid type of "blueprint ecclesiology."[\(32\)](#)

Avoiding Legalism

Submission to Scripture, even obedience to clear commandments, should not happen legalistically. Thus, it is not enough merely to hear a command and put it into practice; rather, the intention behind the commandment must be understood. The hazard of failing to grasp the underlying intention of a command is well illustrated in the practice of a certain religious community, which had carefully observed an old rule in its constitution that community members were not permitted to eat chicken. At the time the constitution was written, chicken was a great delicacy; the rule was intended to help community members achieve simplicity of life. Until recently, the members of that community ate the most expensive meats in good conscience, while carefully avoiding chicken – often one of the cheapest meats in recent years.

A further example of the need to grasp the intention of a rule concerns practices designed to observe the prohibition against braided hair in 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3. In some Christian groups, women never wear braided hair in any sense (not even pigtails on the little girls), in order to obey that scriptural directive. Their desire to obey the Lord may be very commendable, but it does seem clear that the kind of braided hair that was being discussed in the passages was a luxurious style of headdress, not simply any manner of braiding hair. The intention of the passages is to prohibit luxurious adornment, not to eliminate what most people nowadays would understand by "hair braiding."

Avoiding legalism also involves recognizing exceptions. At times, it might be right for a Christian to breach

good order because circumstances make that the only reasonable course. If a husband and father has mental disabilities a wife might have to assume the role of head of the family, while a similar disability in a wife might require the husband to mother the children as well as to father them. The story of Deborah in the Old Testament is a canonized story of an exception from the normal order of the roles of men and women.

Finally, avoiding legalism also means employing good judgment in determining the relative importance of different scriptural prescriptions. Not everything is important enough to die for. It is worth dying rather than burn a pinch of incense in worship of an idol (Revelation 14:9). But it is not necessarily worth irreparably damaging a marriage in order to preserve a correct scriptural pattern of roles for men and women in all respects.

Avoiding legalism, however, does not mean following the "spirit" of the biblical teachings rather than the "letter," in the sense sometimes given to those terms.[\(33\)](#) When Paul talked about following the spirit rather than the letter of the law (2 Cor 3), he meant Christians following the law written on their hearts by the Holy Spirit rather than simply following the external code.

Sometimes, however, the phrase "following the spirit of the biblical teachings" is used to refer to a process by which one does not really follow the biblical teachings at all. Rather, one finds certain values or principles in those teachings which one follows in one's own way. Someone operating in this vein "follows the spirit of the biblical teachings" on the roles of men and women, for instance, by valuing both men and women and by seeing the mutual responsibility in relationships which involve men and women. It is then suggested that as long as one is trying to follow the spirit of the teachings, one can avoid being literalistic about actually having the husband be the head of the family. By the same principle, one can also (as some have suggested) follow the spirit of the commandment against adultery by not having sexual intercourse with any married people whom one did not love.[\(34\)](#)

"Following the spirit of the biblical teachings," then, can be a phrase which ultimately means not following the biblical teachings at all, but merely selecting aspects of them and obeying only what one thinks is important. It can be a way of avoiding submission to the Lord's word.

Neither does avoiding legalism mean disobeying directives in the scripture in order to avoid turning the gospel into law. Some currents of theology would want to make the gospel the key interpretative principle of the New Testament, seeing everything else as secondary.[\(35\)](#) These theologians stress the gospel as freeing us from the law, and they resist any efforts to approach the New Testament as law. In many respects, these currents emphasize important elements of the New Testament. They attempt to synthesize New Testament teaching in a way which preserves Paul's teaching on grace and faith. But the gospel certainly involves the lordship of Jesus, and the gospel is received in repentance and a commitment to obedience to the Lord. Our righteousness may not save us, but that does not mean that obedience can be eliminated from the Christian life. The Scripture also talks about "lawlessness" (*anomia*). In fact, 2 Peter 3:15-17 sees this lawlessness as often expressing itself in scriptural interpretation and as leading to ruin:

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 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 scripture. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability.

The very difficulties of scriptural interpretation can sometimes undercut submissiveness to the Lord in Scripture.⁽³⁶⁾ Often Christians feel (with good reason) that they do not know what the passages mean, how they were intended, or how they can be applied in a responsible way. In this area, as in others in the Christian life, eagerness to obey can make someone scrupulous or confused, and there is the possibility of committing a foolish mistake in an effort to obey. Such a possibility should not lead to replacing eager obedience with a cautious skepticism. It should rather produce a desire to balance eagerness with wisdom.

The Lord is probably more pleased with someone who makes a foolish mistake in attempting to obey Scripture than with someone who requires that everything be proved beyond a shadow of a doubt before considering obedience. At the same time, submission to Scripture does not mean trying to compile a distinguished record of foolish mistakes. No one will probably ever be flawless in obedience, but the Lord is asking for a relationship with him which involves desiring to do his will, doing it as it is understood, asking for his light, and actively seeking to grow in wisdom and the understanding of his will.

An attitude of submissiveness to God's word can easily become legalism and a burden, but it does not have to be. It can be a loving, trusting desire to do the will of the Lord, who for our sake died and was raised that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Is This Fundamentalism?

The approach taken in this book runs the risk of being labeled "Fundamentalist." A brief discussion, therefore, would be helpful for understanding the meaning of the term "Fundamentalist," and for evaluating the validity of applying that label to the approach taken here.

The term "Fundamentalism" was coined in the course of the anti-Modernism struggle in the early part of the twentieth century. It arose among American Protestants who, for the most part, had been influenced by the broad movement termed "Evangelicalism." The Evangelical Movement had arisen in the eighteenth century, and was characterized by a stress on the gospel and on calling people to a conversion to Jesus Christ. Closely linked to these stresses was an emphasis on the Scripture as both the authoritative word of God, and the main instrument for Christian conversion and growth. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Evangelical Movement had influenced significant segments of most of the main Protestant denominations in the United States and Great Britain.

In the course of the nineteenth century, Biblical criticism, the study of comparative religions, and evolutionary theories began to challenge many of the traditional views about the scripture and about the authority of Biblical revelation. As a result, the movement which is sometimes called "Protestant Liberalism" or "Modernism" arose as a way of altering Christian doctrinal and moral tenets to better accommodate them to what Modernism understood to be scientific evidence.

Fundamentalism arose as a countermovement to Modernism.⁽³⁷⁾ In an attempt to secure the basis of the Christian faith, Fundamentalists laid down what they considered to be the "fundamentals" of the Christian faith, and attempted to defend them. While fundamentals varied somewhat in their formulation, they generally included doctrines such as the inspiration, inerrancy, and supreme authority of Scripture, the Trinity, Jesus Christ as true God and true man, the Fall, the atonement through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the second coming, the new birth in the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of the dead, and heaven and hell.⁽³⁸⁾

Fundamentalism grew directly out of an Evangelical environment and background, and formulated the

fundamentals in the way an Evangelical Protestant would (rather than the way a Catholic or an Orthodox or even a traditional Lutheran would). Yet, in order to maintain a proper perspective, it is helpful to realize that Catholic Church leaders were fighting much the same battle against Modernism-Protestant Liberalism at the same time.⁽³⁹⁾ Pius X, the pope most identified with the anti-Modernist struggle, would have accepted the main points of the Fundamentalists, even if he would have formulated those points differently.

As Fundamentalism developed, the more conservative spokesmen assumed prominence and added to their defense of the fundamentals a vehement attack on evolutionary theories. Partly because of the growth of the more conservative wing of Fundamentalism, and partly because of the bad press given Fundamentalism, many Evangelicals and other conservative Protestants who believed in all the fundamentals distanced themselves from the name "Fundamentalism" and from those who claimed it.

The "fundamentalists" gradually received a reputation for being anti-intellectual, politically conservative, belligerent, and legalistic. They also became identified with their opposition to "critical" methods of scriptural interpretation. How far this reputation is justified is not relevant to this discussion. The point is that the term "Fundamentalism" became a symbol of a certain approach, especially in scriptural interpretation, much as the term "the Vatican" symbolizes for many a religious bureaucracy and ecclesiastical power politics.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Thus, the term "Fundamentalism" could be used in a variety of ways. First, it could be used in the technical sense as referring to an early twentieth century anti-Modernist movement within Evangelical Protestantism (and to those who identify with that movement today). Secondly, it could be used in a symbolic way, referring to all those who are opposed to Biblical criticism, or, relatedly, to all who approach the scripture in a somewhat "uncritical" way. Or it could be used in yet a third way: as a term of abuse for someone whom one considers to be more conservative than oneself. In this third sense, "Fundamentalist" is applied somewhat freely to categorize a great variety of opinions that people do not like. Briefly examining each of these senses of the term can aid in clarifying some of the issues involved.

First, it is important to recognize that there is, in fact, a technical sense of the term—there was an actual historical movement called Fundamentalism, and there are still many people who identify with that movement. Many churches today can properly be termed "Fundamentalist" in this technical sense (or "Fundamental," as many of them tend to prefer). Most Classical Pentecostals, for instance, are Fundamentalists in this sense.

A failure to recognize the existence of this technical sense of "Fundamentalism" can lead to a great deal of confusion in the use of the term. For instance, believing that Scripture teaches that there should be differences in the roles of men and women can easily earn one the label "Fundamentalist." However, historically speaking this would, in fact, be a particularly inapt label. Many of those who were historically Fundamentalists (anti-Modernist, conservative Evangelicals) were, paradoxically, among the first to ordain women and to argue for a less traditional role for women.⁽⁴¹⁾

More common than this first meaning, however, is the second use of "Fundamentalist" – as a way of referring to certain approaches to the interpretation of Scripture. Someone can be called a "Fundamentalist" because someone else regards his approach to interpreting the Scripture as too conservative or uncritical. The following are approaches which seem to provoke being called a Fundamentalist:⁽⁴²⁾

1. Those who do not seem to fully accept or fully use modern methods of scriptural criticism will often be termed Fundamentalists by someone who considers them too uncritical either in their overall approach or in a given exegesis. Among the things which will commonly elicit such

a label are approaches which seem to interpret the scripture without an adequate sense of literary form (such as interpreting the book of Jonah as a historical narrative), or which seem to fail to adequately ascertain the author's intention (for instance, by holding that women should not wear braided hair on the basis of 1 Tm 2:19 and 1 Pt 3:3). Here it is helpful to observe that people can be called Fundamentalists because they have rejected certain critical methods or principles after a great deal of thought and scholarship or because they are not too educated in scriptural interpretation and simply take passages out of context or use facile proof-text approaches.⁽⁴³⁾

2. Those who hold what could be called a conservative view of the historical facticity of narrative sections of the Bible or of the inerrancy of the Bible in its statement of fact (scientific and historical as well) are often termed Fundamentalists. Those who hold that creation actually happened in six days, that a whale did swallow Jonah, that every discrepancy between accounts has to somehow be harmonized will often be considered Fundamentalists for holding such views. Those who call them Fundamentalists will sometimes view the problem as a failure to adopt proper methods of Biblical criticism (not understanding the literary form of Jonah, for instance, and thinking that it is a historical narrative). Sometimes they will view the problem as simple traditionalism.

3. Those who hold that the scripture should be obeyed when it gives a command without considering questions of applicability will often be termed Fundamentalists. The label can be applied not only to those who forbid women to wear braided hair but likewise to those who object to homosexual relationships on the basis of scriptural commands. On the other hand, it is not likely to be applied to someone who is a pacifist out of obedience to their understanding of Scripture – thus showing that the term is normally used for those who are adopting what would be viewed as a conservative position.

One person, of course, could take all of these approaches or only some of them. Frequently, one or all of these approaches will be described as "reading or interpreting the scriptures literally."⁽⁴⁴⁾

There is a historical reason for calling these three approaches "Fundamentalist." In the anti-Modernist controversy, the Fundamentalists opposed many of the critical methods and positions, considering them an expression of Liberal Protestantism or Modernism. It should be pointed out, however, that other opponents of Modernism (for example, the Catholic Church) took the same positions. The above three approaches to scriptural interpretation were as characteristic of the dominant Catholic method of scripture interpretation before Vatican Council II (or at least before Pius XII) as they are characteristic of the Fundamentalists. Hence, it is historically somewhat unfair to label all opposition to Biblical criticism as "Fundamentalist." Nonetheless, such labeling is common.

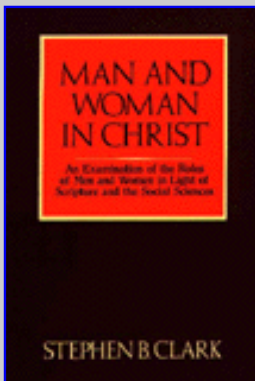
The above three approaches do not characterize the argument of this book. One of them concerns matters which are not central to the discussion of the book: the issue of historical facticity and inerrancy. The remaining two, however, are central to the discussion of the book. It is, however, possible to hold that Scripture teaches a difference in the roles of men and women without disregarding questions of literary form, or ignoring the intention of the author, or neglecting principles of sound Biblical scholarship. As the Note on Method in exegesis pointed out, this would be as obvious now as it was twenty years ago if it were not for the amount of politicization that has entered the discussion in recent years. It is also possible to hold that the Scripture should be followed in its teaching without ignoring questions of applicability. The following chapters raise the issues in the area of applicability (see especially Chapter Twenty).

The approach taken in this book is not "Fundamentalist" in either the technical/historical sense of the term, nor in its approach to the interpretation of Scripture. There remains, however, a fourth use of the term by which the approach taken in this book could be labeled "Fundamentalist." That is, the term could be used in a derogatory way as an epithet for certain opinions regarded as being conservative or even reactionary.

There are at least two reasons why the term has become a frequent although inaccurate slogan. One reason is simple ignorance. Many people know little or nothing about Fundamentalists and have not really thought through the issues, but they know that the term "Fundamentalist" can be used to describe someone that seems more conservative than they are. They may inaptly label a book such as this one "Fundamentalist" because they disagree with its conclusion, e.g., "anyone who can come up with such a conclusion must be a Fundamentalist."

There is a second and more important reason for this use of the term, however. Many who use the term in an inaccurate, derogatory way have come under the very strong influence of secular humanism (Liberal Protestantism, Modernism). They use the word as a term of abuse to discredit their more orthodox opponents. These people interpret Scripture as a book which does not have God as its author in any significant sense, and as a book without real authority. Their approach to interpretation comes out of a line of thought which has compromised the fundamentals of the faith (including the articles of the creed and the commandments), and that seeks to interpret Scripture in a way that allows that compromise. Often, they will label the approach taken in this chapter to the authority of Scripture as "Fundamentalist." However, if this approach is Fundamentalist, almost all of Christian tradition – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant alike – is Fundamentalist.

Simply accepting the need to submit to Scripture should not be enough to qualify one as a Fundamentalist. The question of the authority of Scripture, however, is a particularly difficult and controversial one today. As has been seen, there are many ways in which the authority of Scripture is disregarded without seeming to be. The following chapter will continue the discussion on the authority of Scripture, and will treat more fully the ways in which that issue enters into the contemporary discussion of the roles of men and women.



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This article is excerpted from the book, [Man and Woman in Christ](#), copyright © 1980 by Stephen B. Clark, Chapter 14). It was originally published by Servant Books, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U. S.A. Nihil Obstat: Rev. George A. Kelly; Imprimatur: Most Reverend Kenneth Povish, Bishop of Lansing. A new edition of the book is now published by [Tabor House](#).]

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The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



Christ Pantocrator (Ruler of All), Byzantine icon by [Vladimir Grygorenko](#)

How to Read the Bible

by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk, writing in eighteenth-century Russia, has this to say about our Orthodox attitude towards the Holy Scriptures: “If an earthly king, our emperor, wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly, with great rejoicing and careful attention. You have been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven. And yet you almost despise such a gift, so priceless a treasure.” He goes on to say: “Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him.”

We are to see Scripture as a personal letter addressed specifically to each one of us by God. We are each of us to see Scripture reading as a direct, individual dialogue between Christ and ourselves.

Two centuries after Saint Tikhon, the 1976 Moscow Conference between the Orthodox and the Anglicans expressed in different but equally valid terms the true attitude towards Scripture. Signed also by the Anglican delegates, the Moscow statement provides an admirable summary of the Orthodox view of the Bible: “The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God’s revelation of Himself – in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and the whole history of salvation. And as such they express the word of God in human language. . . . We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church. Our approach to the Bible is one of obedience.”

Combining Saint Tikhon and the Moscow state-ment, we may distinguish four key qualities which mark an Orthodox reading of Scripture. First, our reading should be obedient. Second, it should be ecclesial, within the Church. Third, it should be Christ-centered. Fourth, it should be personal.

Reading the Bible with Obedience

First of all, then, when reading Scripture, we are to listen in a spirit of obedience. Saint Tikhon and the 1976 Moscow Conference both alike emphasize the divine inspiration of the Bible. Scripture is a letter from God. Christ Himself is speaking. The Scriptures are God’s authoritative witness of Himself. They express the Word of God in our human language. They are divinely inspired. Since God Himself is speaking to us in the Bible, our response is rightly one of obedience, of receptivity and listening. As we read, we wait on the Spirit.

But, while divinely inspired, the Bible is also humanly expressed. It is a whole library of different books written at varying times by distinct persons. Each book of the Bible reflects the outlook of the age in which it was written and the particular viewpoint of the author. For God does nothing in isolation; divine grace cooperates with human freedom. God does not abolish our personhood but enhances it. And so it is in the writing of inspired Scripture. The authors were not just a passive instrument, a dictation machine recording a message. Each writer of Scripture contributes his or her particular human gifts. Alongside the divine aspect, there is also a human element in Scripture. We are to value both.

Each of the four Gospels, for example, has its own particular approach. Matthew presents more particularly a Jewish understanding of Christ, with an emphasis on the Kingdom of heaven. Mark contains specific, picturesque details of Christ’s ministry not given elsewhere. Luke expresses the universality of Christ’s love, His all-embracing compassion that extends equally to Jew and to Gentile. In John there is a more inward and more mystical approach to Christ, with an emphasis on divine light and divine indwelling. We are to enjoy and explore to the full this life-giving variety within the Bible.

Because Scripture is in this way the word of God expressed in human language, there is room for honest and exacting critical enquiry when studying the Bible. Exploring the human aspect of the Bible, we are to use to the full our God-given human reason. The Orthodox Church does not exclude scholarly research into the origin, dates, and authorship of books of the Bible.

Alongside this human element, however, we see always the divine element. These are not simply books written by individual human writers. We hear in Scripture not just human words, marked by a greater or lesser skill and perceptiveness, but the eternal, uncreated Word of God Himself, the divine Word of salvation. When we come to the Bible, then, we come not simply out of curiosity, to gain information. We come to the Bible

with a specific question, a personal question about ourselves: “How can I be saved?”

As God’s divine word of salvation in human language, Scripture should evoke in us a sense of wonder. Do you ever feel, as you read or listen, that it has all become too familiar? Has the Bible grown rather boring? Continually we need to cleanse the doors of our perception and to look in amazement with new eyes at what the Lord sets before us.

Some time ago I had a dream which I remember vividly. I was back in the house where, for three years as a child, I lived in boarding school. At first in my dream I went through rooms that were already familiar to me. But then the companion who was showing me round took me into other rooms that I had never seen before – spacious, beautiful, full of light. Finally we entered a small chapel, with candles gleaming and dark golden mosaics.

In my dream I said to my companion, “How strange that I have lived here for three years, and yet I never knew about the existence of all these rooms.” And he replied to me, “But it is always so.”

I awoke; and behold, it was a dream.

We are to feel towards the Bible exactly the awe, the sense of wonder, of expectation and surprise, that I experienced in my dream. There are so many rooms in Scripture that we have never yet entered. There is so much depth and majesty for us to discover. This sense of *wonder* is an essential element in our responsive obedience.

If obedience means wonder, it also means *listening*. Such is the original meaning of the word in both Greek and Latin.

As a student I used to follow the *Goon Show* on the radio. In one particular incident that I recall, the telephone rings and a character reaches out his arm to pick up the receiver. “Hello,” he says, “hello, hello.” His volume rises. “Who is speaking – I can’t hear you. Hello, who is speaking?” The voice at the other end says, “You are speaking.” “Ah,” he replies. “I thought the voice sounded familiar.” And he puts the receiver down.

That unfortunately is a parable of what happens to us all too often. We are better at talking than listening. We hear the sound of our own voice, but we don’t pause to hear the voice of the other who is speaking to us. So the first requirement, as we read Scripture, is to stop talking and to *listen* – to listen with obedience.

When we enter an Orthodox Church, decorated in the traditional manner, and look up towards the sanctuary at the east end, we see there in the apse the Mother of God with her hands raised to heaven – the ancient scriptural manner of praying that many still use today. Such symbolically is to be our attitude also as we read Scripture – the attitude of receptivity, of hands invisibly raised to heaven. Reading the Bible, we are to model ourselves on the Blessed Virgin Mary, for she is supremely *the one who listens*. At the Annunciation she listens with obedience and responds to the angel, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She could not have borne the Word of God in her body if she had not first listened to the Word of God in her heart. After the shepherds have adored the newborn Christ, it is said of her: “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Again, when Mary finds Jesus in the temple, we are told: “His mother kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). The same need for listening is emphasized in the last words attributed to the Mother of God in Scripture, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee: “Whatever He says to you, do it” (John 2:5), she says to the servants – and to all of us.

In all this the Blessed Virgin Mary serves as a mirror, as a living icon of the biblical Christian. We are to be like her as we hear the Word of God: pondering, keeping all these things in our hearts, doing whatever He tells us. We are to listen in obedience as God speaks.

Understanding the Bible through the Church

In the second place, as the Moscow Conference says, “We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church.” Our approach to the Bible is not only obedient but *ecclesial*.

It is the Church that tells us what is Scripture. A book is not part of Scripture because of any particular theory about its dating and authorship. Even if it could be proved, for example, that the Fourth Gospel was not actually written by John, the beloved disciple of Christ, this would not alter the fact that we Orthodox accept the Fourth Gospel as Holy Scripture. Why? Because the Gospel of John, whoever the author may be – and for myself I continue to accept the Johannine authorship – is accepted by the Church and in the Church.

It is the Church that tells us what is Scripture, and it is equally the Church that tells us how Scripture is to be understood. Coming upon the Ethiopian as he read the Old Testament in his chariot, Philip the Apostle asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And the Ethiopian answered, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:30, 31). We are all in the position of the Ethiopian. The words of Scripture are not always self-explanatory. God speaks directly to the heart of each one of us as we read our Bible – Scripture reading is, as Saint Tikhon says, a personal dialogue between each one and Christ – but we also need guidance. And our guide is the Church. We make full use of our own personal understanding, assisted by the Spirit, we make full use of the findings of modern biblical research, but always we submit private opinion – whether our own or that of the scholars – to the total experience of the Church throughout the ages.

The Orthodox standpoint here is summed up in the question asked of a convert at the reception service used by the Russian Church: “Do you acknowledge that the Holy Scripture must be accepted and interpreted in accordance with the belief which has been handed down by the Holy Fathers, and which the Holy Orthodox Church, our Mother, has always held and still does hold?”

We read the Bible personally, but not as isolated individuals. We read as the members of a family, the family of the Orthodox Catholic Church. When reading Scripture, we say not “I” but “We.” We read in communion with all the other members of the Body of Christ, in all parts of the world and in all generations of time. The decisive test and criterion for our understanding of what the Scripture means is *the mind of the Church*. The Bible is the book of the Church.

To discover this “mind of the Church,” where do we begin? Our first step is to see how Scripture is used in worship. How, in particular, are biblical lessons chosen for reading at the different feasts? We should also consult the writings of the Church Fathers, and consider how they interpret the Bible. Our Orthodox manner of reading Scripture is in this way both *liturgical* and *patristic*. And this, as we all realize, is far from easy to do in practice, because we have at our disposal so few Orthodox commentaries on Scripture available in English, and most of the Western commentaries do not employ this liturgical and patristic approach.

As an example of what it means to interpret Scripture in a liturgical way, guided by the use made of it at Church feasts, let us look at the Old Testament lessons appointed for Vespers on the Feast of the Annunciation, on March 25. They are three in number: (1) Genesis 28:10-17: Jacob’s dream of a ladder set up from earth to heaven; (2) Ezekiel 43:27-44:4: the prophet’s vision of the Jerusalem sanctuary, with the closed

gate through which none but the Prince may pass; (3) Proverbs 9:1-11: one of the great sophianic passages in the Old Testament, beginning “Wisdom has built her house.”

These texts in the Old Testament, then, as their selection for the 25th of March and other feasts of the Theotokos indicates, are all to be understood as prophecies concerning the Incarnation from the Virgin. Mary is Jacob’s ladder, supplying the flesh that God incarnate takes upon entering our human world. Mary is the closed gate who alone among women bore a child while still remaining inviolate. Mary provides the house which Christ the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24) takes as his dwelling (in another interpretation, the title Wisdom or Sophia refers to the Mother of God herself). Exploring in this manner the choice of lessons for the various feasts, we discover layers of biblical interpretation that are by no means obvious on a first reading.

Take as another example Vespers on Holy Saturday, the first part of the ancient Paschal Vigil. Here we have no less than fifteen Old Testament lessons. Regrettably, in all too many churches most of these are omitted, and so God’s people are starved of their proper biblical nourishment. This sequence of fifteen lessons sets before us the whole scheme of sacred history, while at the same time underlining the deeper meaning of Christ’s Resurrection. First among the lessons is Genesis 1:1-13, the account of Creation: Christ’s Resurrection is a new Creation. The fourth lesson is the Book of Jonah in its entirety, with the prophet’s three days in the belly of the whale foreshadowing Christ’s Resurrection after three days in the tomb (*cf.* Matthew 12:40). The sixth lesson recounts the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites (Exodus 13:20-15:19), which anticipates the new Passover of Pascha whereby Christ passes over from death to life (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 5:7; 10:1-4). The final lesson is the story of the three Holy Children in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3), once more a “type” or prophecy of Christ’s rising from the tomb.

Such is the effect of reading Scripture ecclesially in the Church and with the Church. Studying the Old Testament in this liturgical way and using the Fathers to help us, everywhere we uncover signposts pointing forward to the mystery of Christ and of His Mother. Reading the Old Testament in the light of the New, and the New in the light of the Old – as the Church’s calendar encourages us to do – we discover the unity of Holy Scripture. One of the best ways of identifying correspondences between the Old and New Testaments is to use a good biblical concordance. This can often tell us more about the meaning of Scripture than any commentary.

In Bible study circles within our parishes, it is helpful to give one person the special task of noting whenever a particular passage in the Old or New Testament is used for a festival or a saint’s day. We can then discuss together the reasons why each specific passage has been so chosen. Others in the group can be assigned to do homework among the Fathers, using above all the biblical homilies of Saint John Chrysostom, which have all been translated into English. But remember, you’ll have to dig to find what you are looking for. The Fathers were speaking to a different age from ours, and need to be read with imagination. We must not be as literal-minded as the nineteenth-century Russian village priest who was told by his bishop, “Take your sermons from the Fathers.” So on the next great feast he decided to read at the Liturgy a sermon of Saint John Chrysostom without changing a single word. The church was packed, and his parishioners were disconcerted when he commenced in ringing tones, “What is this? What do I see? The church is empty. There is nobody here. Where have they all gone? Everyone is in the hippodrome.”

Father Georges Florovsky used to say that Orthodox today need to acquire a patristic mind. But to gain that, we must penetrate beyond the bare words of the Fathers to the kernel of their inner meaning.

Christ, the Heart of the Bible

The third element in our reading of Scripture is that it should be *Christ-centered*. When the 1976 Moscow Conference tells us, “The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole,” where are we to locate this unity and coherence? In the person of Christ. He is the unifying thread that runs through the entirety of Holy Scripture, from the first sentence to the last. We have already mentioned the way in which Christ may be seen foreshadowed on the pages of the Old Testament. As my history teacher at school used to say, “It all ties up.” That is an excellent principle to employ when reading Scripture. Only connect.

Much modern critical study of Scripture in the West has adopted an analytical approach, breaking up each book into different sources. The connecting links are unraveled, and the Bible is reduced to a series of bare primary units. There is certainly value in this. But we need to see the unity as well as the diversity of Scripture, the all-embracing end as well as the scattered beginnings. Orthodoxy prefers on the whole a synthetic rather than an analytical approach, seeing Scripture as an integrated whole, with Christ everywhere as the bond of union.

Always we seek for the point of convergence between the Old Testament and the New, and this we find in Jesus Christ. Orthodoxy assigns particular significance to the “typological” method of interpretation, whereby “types” of Christ, signs and symbols of His work, are discerned throughout the Old Testament. A notable example of this is Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem, who offered bread and wine to Abraham (Genesis 14:18), and who is seen as a type of Christ not only by the Fathers but even in the New Testament itself (Hebrews 5:6; 7:1). Another instance is the way in which, as we have seen, the Old Passover foreshadows the New; Israel’s deliverance from Pharaoh at the Red Sea anticipates our deliverance from sin through the death and Resurrection of the Savior. Such is the method of interpretation that we are to apply throughout the Bible. Why, for instance, in the second half of Lent are the Old Testament readings from Genesis dominated by the figure of Joseph? Why in Holy Week do we read from the Book of Job? Because Joseph and Job are innocent sufferers, and as such they are types or foreshadowings of Jesus Christ, whose innocent suffering upon the Cross the Church is at the point of celebrating. It all ties up.

“A Christian,” remarks Father Alexander Schmemmann, “is the one who wherever he looks finds everywhere Christ, and rejoices in Him.” We can say this in particular of the biblical Christian. He is the one who, wherever he looks, finds everywhere Christ, on every page of Scripture.

The Bible as Personal

In the words of an early ascetic writer in the Christian East, Saint Mark the Monk: “He who is humble in his thoughts and engaged in spiritual work, when he reads the Holy Scriptures, will apply everything to himself and not to his neighbor.” As Orthodox Christians we are to look everywhere in Scripture for a *personal* application. We are to ask not just, “What does it mean?” but, “What does it mean to *me*?” Scripture is a personal dialogue between the Savior and myself – Christ speaking to me, and me answering. That is the fourth criterion in our Bible reading.

I am to see all the stories in Scripture as part of my own personal story. Who is Adam? The name Adam means “man,” “human,” and so the Genesis account of Adam’s Fall is also a story about me. I am Adam. It is to me that God says, “Adam, where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). “Where is God?” we often ask. But the real question is what God asks the Adam in each of us: “Where are you?”

When, in the story of Cain and Abel, we read God’s words to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” (Genesis 4:9), that also is addressed to each one of us. Who is Cain? It is myself. And God asks the Cain in each of us, “Where is your brother?” The way to God lies through love of other people, and there is no other way.

Disowning my brother, I replace the image of God with the mark of Cain, and deny my own essential humanity.

In reading Scripture, we may take three steps. First, what we have in Scripture is sacred history: the history of the world from the Creation, the history of the chosen people, the history of God Incarnate in Palestine, the “mighty works” after Pentecost. The Christianity that we find in the Bible is not an ideology, not a philosophical theory, but a historical faith.

Then we are to take a second step. The history presented in the Bible is a personal history. We see God intervening at specific times and in specific places, as He enters into dialogue with individual persons. He addresses each one by name. We see set before us the specific calls issued by God to Abraham, Moses and David, to Rebekah and Ruth, to Isaiah and the prophets, and then to Mary and the Apostles. We see *the particularity* of the divine action in history, not as a scandal but as a blessing. God’s love is universal in scope, but He chooses to become incarnate in a particular corner of the earth, at a particular time and from a particular Mother.

We are in this manner to savor all the specificity of God’s action as recorded in Scripture. The person who loves the Bible loves details of dating and geography. Orthodoxy has an intense devotion to the Holy Land, to the exact places where Christ lived and taught, died and rose again. An excellent way to enter more deeply into our Scripture reading is to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Galilee. Walk where Christ walked. Go down to the Dead Sea, sit alone on the rocks, feel how Christ felt during the forty days of His temptation in the wilderness. Drink from the well where He spoke with the Samaritan woman. Go at night to the Garden of Gethsemane, sit in the dark under the ancient olives and look across the valley to the lights of the city. Experience to the full the distinctive “isness” of the historical setting, and take that experience back with you to your daily Scripture reading.

Then we are to take a third step. Reliving biblical history in all its particularity, we are to apply it directly to ourselves. We are to say to ourselves, “All these places and events are not just far away and long ago, but are also part of my own personal encounter with Christ. The stories include me.”

Betrayal, for example, is part of the personal story of everyone. Have we not all at some time in our life betrayed others, and have we not all known what it is to be betrayed, and does not the memory of these moments leave continuing scars on our psyche? Reading, then, the account of Saint Peter’s betrayal of Christ and of his restoration after the Resurrection, we can see ourselves as each an actor in the story. Imagining what both Peter and Jesus must have experienced at the moment immediately after the betrayal, we enter into their feelings and make them our own. I am Peter; in this situation can I also be Christ? Reflecting likewise on the process of reconciliation – seeing how the risen Christ with a love utterly devoid of sentimentality restored the fallen Peter to fellowship, seeing how Peter on his side had the courage to accept this restoration – we ask ourselves: How Christlike am I to those who have betrayed me? And, after my own acts of betrayal, am I able to accept the forgiveness of others – am I able to forgive myself?

Or take, as another example, Saint Mary Magdalene. Can I see myself mirrored in her? Do I share in the generosity, the spontaneity and loving impulsiveness, that she showed when she poured out the alabaster box of ointment on the feet of Christ? “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.” (Here I follow the normal Western opinion, which identifies the sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50 with Mary Magdalene; in the Christian East this identification is not usually made.) Or am I timid, mean, holding myself back, never ready to give myself fully to anything either good or bad? As the Desert Fathers say, “Better someone who has sinned, if he knows he has sinned and repents, than a person who has not sinned and thinks of himself as

righteous.”

Have I gained the boldness of Saint Mary Magdalene, her constancy and loyalty, when she went out to anoint the body of Christ in the tomb (John 20:1)? Do I hear the risen Savior call me by name, as He called her, and do I respond “Rabboni” with her simplicity and completeness (John 20:16)?

Reading Scripture in this way – in obedience, as a member of the Church, finding Christ everywhere, seeing everything as a part of my own personal story – we shall sense something of the variety and depth to be found in the Bible. Yet always we shall feel that in our biblical exploration we are only at the very beginning. We are like someone launching out in a tiny boat across a limitless ocean.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 118[119]:105).

Timothy Ware, His Excellency the Most Reverend Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, was Spalding Lecturer of Eastern Orthodox Studies at Oxford University until his retirement in 2001. “How to Read the Bible” by Bishop Kallistos Ware, is excerpted from *The Orthodox Study Bible*, 2008, Thomas Nelson publishers, Nashville, Tennessee. Reprinted with permission.

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom

email: living.bulwark@yahoo.com

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August/September 2013 - Vol. 69

The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



You Can Understand the Bible

by Peter Kreeft

Reading the Bible should be a form of prayer. The Bible should be read in God's presence and as the unfolding of His mind. It is not just a book, but God's love letter to you. It is God's revelation, God's mind, operating through your mind and your reading, so your reading is your response to His mind and will. Reading it is aligning your mind and will with God's; therefore it is a fulfillment of the prayer "Thy will be done", which is the most basic and essential key to achieving our whole purpose on earth: holiness and happiness. I challenge each reader to give a good excuse (to God, not to me, or even just to yourself) for not putting aside fifteen minutes a day to use this fundamental aid to fulfilling the meaning of your life.

Both prayer and Bible reading are ways of listening to God. They should blend: our prayer should be biblical and our Bible reading prayerful...

Its power comes from two wills, God's and ours. It is the Spirit's sword (Ephesians 6:17) that cuts our very being apart (Hebrews 4:12), though we must give it an opening by exposing our minds and hearts and wills to its cutting edge. When we do that, God's Kingdom comes to earth. For it first comes to that tiny but crucially important bit of earth that is your mind and will. Then it transforms your life, which your mind and will control. Then, through your life, your world.

What strange kind of a book is this, anyway?

The word *Bible* means “book,” (singular). But the Bible is in fact seventy-two different books (sixty-six in the Protestant canon) from many different authors and times and in many different literary styles and forms: history, poetry, prophecy, drama, philosophy, letters, visions, practical advice, songs, laws, and much more. This is not a book, this is a world.

Yet there is a unity in this diversity. Most essentially the Bible is a story. Unlike the holy books of other religions, the Bible's basic line is a story line. It narrates real events that really happened to real people in real history. G. K. Chesterton said, “There are only two things that never get boring: stories and persons.” The persons involved here include the three most important Persons of all: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Bible is “stories of God”. But it is also stories about us, about our relationships with God and each other. (The word *religion*, from the Latin *religare*, means essentially “binding relationship”.) The horizontal (man-to-man) and vertical (man-to-God) relationships meet here and form a cross.

But there are many kinds of stories: war stories, love stories, detective stories, and many more. What kind of story is this? It tells us what kind of story we are in; that is how it tells us the meaning of our lives.

It is a love story, because it is history, and history is “His story”, and He is love. Love is God's plan and purpose in all that He does.

The story unfolds in three acts, which theologians call creation, fall, and redemption. Every story ever told fits this pattern, because this is the basic pattern of all human history.

We could call the three stages setup, upset, and reset. First a situation is set up; then it is somehow upset by a problem or conflict or challenge; and then it is reset, when the challenge is confronted, either successfully or unsuccessfully. Paradise, Paradise Lost, and Paradise Regained are the three acts of the cosmic human drama, and we are now in the third act, which began as early as the third chapter of Genesis, when God began to “redeem”, or buy back, fallen mankind.

This third act, in turn, has three scenes. First, God reveals Himself as Father, in the Old Testament; then'. as Jesus the Son in the Gospels; finally, He sends the Holy Spirit to be the soul of His Church for the rest of time.

History, Wisdom, and Prophecy

The books of both Old and New Testaments are divided into three main categories: history, wisdom, and prophecy. Thus the Bible encompasses past, present, and future. But its history books are more than records of the past; they tell us truths that are just as true and operative for the present. And its wisdom books tell timeless truths that are not just for the present time but for all times. Finally, its prophets do not merely foretell the future, but “forth-tell” God's truth for all times. The whole Bible is God's permanent prophet continually telling forth the truths we need to know to guide our road on earth to a happy eternity.

There are two fundamentally different ways of reading the Bible: as God's Word to man or as man's word about God; as divine revelation or as human speculation; as God's certain “way down” to us or as our groping and uncertain “way up” to Him. It claims to be the first of those two things: divine revelation, “the Word of God”. But it is the Word of God in the words of men. For God is a good teacher and therefore gives us not only everything that we need but also only what we can take. He reveals Himself more and more,

progressively, as we progress through our story. Stories are not static. At first, it is simple, even simplistic and crude—"baby talk", if you will. But it is true, even perfect, baby talk. We should expect the Old Testament to be more primitive than the New, but no less true. For instance, good and evil are revealed first primarily as justice and injustice, right and wrong; then, gradually, the primacy of charity is revealed. For a charity that has not first learned Justice is only sentiment.

Truth, power, life, and joy

The Bible claims to give us four things that we need and want most, four things God has to give us: truth, power, life, and joy.

First, the Bible claims to give us *truth*—truth about God that we could not have discovered by ourselves (and also truth about ourselves that we could not have discovered by ourselves).

But what kind of truth? Not just abstract correctness but something more solid, the kind of truth that we say is "tried and true" (see Ps 12:6), the kind that is "*made* true" or performed (see Ezekiel 12:25), the kind that "comes true" as the fulfillment of promises (see Matthew 5:17-18). This is the kind of truth we find in a person, not just in an idea—in a person who is totally faithful to his word. God is that Person, and the Hebrew word for that kind of truth is *emeth*. If you let this Book speak to you, you will find that it shows you the true character of God and of yourself. It is a mirror.

Second, the Bible claims to have *power*. It uses images like a hammer and fire (Jeremiah 23:29) for itself. It calls itself "the sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6: 17).

But what kind of power is this? It is not physical power but spiritual power, which is infinitely greater, for it is the power to change spirit, not just matter, power over free hearts and minds, which the Chinese call *te*. It is the power of goodness, and of love, and even of physical weakness and suffering and sacrifice.

Third, the Bible claims to give *life*. Jesus calls it a seed (Luke 8): a living, growing thing. Hebrews 4: 12 says that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit ... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Physical swords only give death; this gives life. Physical swords only cut bodies; this cuts open souls and heals them. For a sword, though in itself a dead thing, can come alive in the hands of a swordsman; and this is "the sword of the Spirit". What happened in Ezekiel 37, when the dry bones came to life, can also happen to you as you read this Book, if you let it—that is, if you read it prayerfully, in the presence of God, talking to Him as you read it. For this is no trick or gimmick of human imagination; He is really there! And "He is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Matthew 22:32).

But what kind of life is this? It is spiritual life, eternal life, supernatural life, a sharing, by grace, in the very life of God (see I Pet 1:4). The Greek word for this in the New Testament is *zoe*. When you read the Bible, beware: it will do things to you. For when you read it, it is reading you. Its Author is reading you, from within. It is like looking into a mirror and seeing another face there looking at you. Or like sitting on a rock that suddenly moves and turns out to be a large and alarming animal. "Look out! It's alive!" Bibles should come with warning labels.

Fourth, the Bible claims to give *joy*. The Psalms are chockfull of expressions of joy in God's Word (e.g., 1:2, 19:8, 1 19: 97, 119:103). Jeremiah says to God, "Thy words became to me a joy" (15:16).

But what kind of Joy is this? It is the joy that does not depend on anything earthly, anything in this world; the joy that is apparently without a cause, because its cause is bigger than the universe: it is God's love. This Book is a love letter from God with your name on it. God doesn't send junk mail or spam. He says, "I have called you by name, you are Mine" (Isaiah 43: 1). The words I love you are magic words: they change us, they bring wonder and inner surprise, they bring us the greatest joy our lives can contain on earth. How much more when we hear them from our Creator!

The Bible calls itself "the Word of God". But it points beyond itself to the "Word of God", Jesus Christ. Every word in this book is part of His portrait. The words man can utter are not alive, but the Word God utters eternally is not only alive but divine. He calls Himself "the Son of God". Meeting Him is the point of the whole Bible (see John 5:3 9) and the whole point of our lives.

Here are ten tips for reading the Bible profitably

by Peter Kreeft

1. At first, forget commentaries and books that try to tell you what the Bible means. Read the Bible itself Get it "straight from the horse's mouth". Data first. The Bible is the most interesting book ever written, but some of the books about it are among the dullest.
2. Read repeatedly. You can never exhaust the riches in this deep mine. The greatest saints, sages, theologians, and philosophers have not exhausted its gold; you won't either.
3. First read through a book quickly, to get an overall idea; then go back and reread more slowly and carefully. Don't rush. Forget time. Relish. Ponder. Meditate. Think. Question. Sink slowly into the spiritual sea and swim in it. Soul-surf its waves.
4. Try to read without prejudice. Let the author speak to you. Don't impose your ideas on the book. Listen first before you talk back.
5. Once you have listened, do talk back. Dialogue with the Author as if He were standing right in front of you—because He is! Ask Him questions and go to His Book to see how He answers. God is a good teacher, and a good teacher wants his students to ask questions.
6. Don't confuse *understanding* with *evaluating*. That is, don't confuse interpretation with critique. First understand, then evaluate. This sounds simple, but it is harder to do than you probably think. For instance, many readers *interpret* the Bible's miracle stories as myths because they don't believe in miracles. But that is simply bad interpretation. Whether or not miracles really happened, the first question is what was the author trying to say. Was he telling a parable, fable, or myth? Or was he telling a story that he claimed really happened? Whether you agree with him or not is the second question, not the first. Keep first things first. Don't say "I don't believe Jesus literally rose from the dead, therefore I interpret the Resurrection as a myth." The Gospel writers did not mean to write myth but fact. If the Resurrection didn't happen, it is not a myth. It is a lie. And if it did happen, it is not a myth. It is a fact.
7. Keep in mind these four questions, then, and ask them in this order: First, what does the passage say? That is the data. Second, what does it mean? What did the author mean? That is the *interpretation*. Third, is it true? That is the question of *belief*. Fourth, so what? What difference does it make to me, to my life now? That is the question of *application*.

8. Look for "the big picture", the main point. Don't lose the forest for the trees. Don't get hung up on a few specific points or passages. Interpret each passage in its context, including the context of the whole Bible.

9. After you have read a passage, go back and analyze it. Outline it. Define it. Get it clear. *Don't be satisfied with a nice, vague feeling.* Find the thought, and the structures of thought.

10. Be honest—in reading any book, but especially this one, because of its total claims on you. There is only one honest reason for believing the Bible: because it is true, not because it is helpful, or beautiful, or comforting, or challenging, or useful, or even good. If it's not true, no honest person should believe it, even if it were all those other things. And if it is, every honest person should, even if it weren't. Seek the truth and you will find it. That's a promise (see Matthew 7:7).

This article is excerpted from the book, [You Can Understand the Bible](#), by Peter Kreeft, revised edition published by [Ignatius Press](#) (c) 2005. Used with permission.

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The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



In the Bible It Is God Who Speaks to Us

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

How can I live a Christian life in the real world, and where are the final authorities for such a life, which alone is worth living?

First, I want to confess quite simply that I believe the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we only need to ask persistently and with some humility in order to receive the answer from it. One cannot simply read the Bible the way one reads other books. One must be prepared to really question it. Only then will it open itself up. Only when we await the final answer from the Bible will it be given to us. That is because in the Bible it is God who speaks to us. And we cannot simply reach our own conclusions about God; rather, we must ask him. He will only answer us if we are seeking after him. Naturally, one can also read the Bible like any other book – from the perspective of textual criticism, for instance. There is nothing to be said against that. But that will only reveal the surface of the Bible, not what is within it. When a dear friend speaks a word to us, do we subject it to analysis? No, we simply accept it, and then it resonates inside us for days. The word of someone we love opens itself up to us the more we “ponder it in our hearts,” as Mary did. In the same way, we should carry the Word of the Bible around with us. We will only be happy in our reading of the Bible when we dare to approach it as the means by which God really speaks to us, the God who loves us and will not leave us with our questions unanswered.

Seeking what we know

Now, we can only seek for what we already know. If I do not know what I am really looking for, then I am not really looking for anything. So, we must already know which God we seek before we can look for him. If I do not know that, I will just rummage around, and seeking will become my main purpose instead of finding anything at all. So I can only find if I know what I seek. Now, I either know about the God I seek from my own experience and insights, from the meanings which I assign to history or nature – that is, from within myself – or I know about him based on his revelation of his own Word. Either I determine the place in which I will find God, or I allow God to determine the place where he will be found.

If it is I who say where God will be, I will always find there a God who in some way corresponds to me, is agreeable to me, fits in with my nature. But if it is God who says where he will be, then that will truly be a place that at first is not agreeable to me at all, that does not fit so well with me. That place is the cross of Christ. And whoever will find God there must draw near to the cross in the manner that the Sermon on the Mount requires. That does not correspond to our nature at all; it is, in fact, completely contrary to it. But this is the message of the Bible, not only the New Testament but also the Old (Is. 53!). In any case, Jesus and Paul understand it in this way – that the cross of Jesus fulfills the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The entire Bible, then, is the Word in which God allows himself to be found by us. Not a place that is agreeable to us or makes sense to us *a priori*, but instead a place that is strange to us and contrary to our nature. Yet, the very place in which God has decided to meet us.

Asking God to help us hear what he wants to say

This is how I read the Bible now. I ask of each passage: What is God saying to us here? And I ask God that he would help us hear what he wants to say. So, we no longer look for general, eternal truths, which correspond with our own “eternal” nature and are, therefore, somehow self-evident to us. Instead, we seek the will of God, who is altogether strange to us, whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, who hides himself from us under the sign of the cross, in which all our ways and thoughts have an end. God is completely other than the so-called eternal verities. Theirs is an eternity made up of our own thoughts and wishes. But God’s Word begins by showing us the cross. And it is to the cross, to death and judgment before God, that our ways and thoughts (even the “eternal” ones) all lead.

Does this perspective somehow make it understandable to you that I do not want to give up the Bible as this strange Word of God at any point, that I intend with all my powers to ask what God wants to say to us here? Any other place outside the Bible has become too uncertain for me. I fear that I will only encounter some divine double of myself there. Does this somehow help you understand why I am prepared for a *sacrificium intellectus* – just in these matters, and only in these matters, with respect to the one, true God! And who does not bring to some passages his sacrifice of the intellect, in the confession that he does not yet understand this or that passage in Scripture, but is certain that even they will be revealed one day as God’s own Word? I would rather make that confession than try to say according to my own opinion: this is divine, that is human.

And now let me tell you quite personally that since I learned to read the Bible in this way – and that is not so long ago – it has become daily more wonderful to me. I read it mornings and evenings, often also during the day. And each day I take up a text, which I have before me for the entire week, and I attempt to immerse myself in it completely, in order to really listen to it. I know that without this I could no longer rightly live, let alone believe. And every day more riddles are solved for me, even though I am still just moving on the surface.

As I was looking at medieval art again in Hildesheim, it occurred to me how much more they understood about the Bible in those times. I am also struck by the fact that our ancestors in their battles for the faith had nothing, and wanted nothing, but the Bible, and that by means of the Bible they became strong and free for a real life of faith. It would be simply superficial, I think, to say that everything has changed since then. Human beings and

their needs have remained the same. And the Bible answers those needs today no less than then. It may be that this sounds very primitive. But you have no idea how happy one can be to find one's way back from the false tracks of so much theology to these primitive things. And I believe that in matters of faith we are always equally primitive.

In a few days it will be Easter. That makes me very happy. But do you think that either of us by ourselves could believe or would want to believe these impossible things that are reported in the gospels, if the Bible did not support us in our belief? Simply the Word, as God's truth, which he vouches for himself. Resurrection – that is not a self-evident idea, an eternal verity. I mean, of course, resurrection as the Bible means it – as a rising up from real death (not sleep) to real life, from life without God to new life with Christ in God. God has said (and we know this through the Bible): “Behold I make all things new.” He made that come true at Easter. Must not this message appear much more impossible, distant, unreal than the whole story of King David, which, by comparison, is quite harmless?

[The decision to trust the Bible or not](#)

There remains, then, only the decision whether we will trust the Bible or not, whether we will allow ourselves to be supported by it as by no other word, in life and death. And I believe that we can only be happy and at peace when we have made that decision.

Forgive me, this has become a very long epistle. I do not know if I should write in this way. Yet I believe I should, and I am very pleased that we have had one such exchange of letters. We must go on sharing what we believe we have discovered. Whether we have a right to speak as I have now spoken to you will be proved in our experience. For now we must lay it aside.

[This excerpt is from a letter which Bonhoeffer wrote to Dr. Rudiger Schleicher, Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, dated 8 April 1936. Original source is from the complete works of Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 26-31, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, Munich. The English translation of the complete letter is published in *Meditating on the Word*, edited and translated by David Mcl. Gracie, © 1986, Rowman and Littlefield Edition, UK and Cowley Publications, US.]

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The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



Approaching Scripture as the Word of God

by J.I. Packer

It is very important that one approaches Scripture as the word of God, not just a mixed bag of human religious reflections and testimonies, some of which are likely to be more right-minded, some less, so that our main job is to pick out which are which. This is very inhibiting to fruitful dealing with the Scriptures.

Trust or mistrust?

As I look around I see a broad division between people whose attitude to the Bible is in general one of trust, because they take the Bible as coming from God, and those whose attitude is fundamentally one of mistrust, because they see it only as a very mixed collection of human testimonies.

Some of these latter folk have been stumbled by what they've been given in seminary, because it has been fashionable for the last 100 years in many Protestant seminaries, and for some 40 or 50 years in many Catholic seminaries (Particularly after Vatican II), to highlight the human aspects of Scripture and dwell on differences, real or fancied, between the viewpoint of one writer and another. The effect of this can be to leave students adrift in a sea of pluralistic relativism, with a bewildering sense that the Bible offers a lot of different points of view and who is to say which is right?

All Scripture proceeds from a single source

I am not questioning the value of these studies of the human side of Scripture, but I see a need to balance that in a way that not all seminaries do. I would balance them by saying to all Bible students, in and out of seminary: “Remember, all Scripture proceeds from a single source, a single mind, the mind of God the Holy Spirit, and you have not taken its measure until you can see its divine unity in and underlying its human variety.” It is the word of God in the form of human words, giving God’s point of view in the form on everything. The unity of Scripture at that level is something that goes far deeper than its surface differences.

Only God can fill our emptiness with an appetite for his word

The biggest thing that keeps us from getting the full benefit of Scripture is simply that we do not feel needy enough. One of the problems of the pastoral role is that it encourages leaders to think that they are full of competence; they have got it made; they know it all. This self-sufficiency is a satanic temptation. A moment of realistic thought will remind us that we are as needy as the next person.

I find it most helpful to remind myself at the beginning of my devotional period [daily time of personal prayer] who God is and what I am. That is to say, I remind myself that God is great, transcendent, that he loves me and he wants to speak to me right now. And I recall that I am the original sinner, the perverse and stupid oaf who misses God’s way constantly. I have made any number of mistakes in my life up to this point and will make a lot more today if I don’t keep in touch with God, and with Christ, my Lord and savior, as I should.

There is nothing like a sense of hunger to give one an appetite for a meal, and there is nothing like a sense of spiritual emptiness and need to give me an appetite for the word of God. Let that be the theme of our first minute or two of prayer as we come to our devotional times, and then we will be tuned in right. God says, “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Psalm 81:10).

The quantity of theological notions in one’s mind, even correct notions, doesn’t say anything about one’s relationship with God. The fact that one knows a lot of theology doesn’t mean that one’s relationship with God is right or is going to be right. The two things are quite distinct. As a professional theologian I find it both helpful and needful to focus this truth to myself by saying to myself over and over again, “What a difference there is between knowing notions, even true notions, and knowing God.” My times with the Bible, like those of all pastoral leaders, indeed all Christians, are meant to be times for knowing God.

[Excerpt from *Encountering God in Scripture: An Interview with J.I. Packer*, published by the Alliance for Faith and Renewal, Ann Arbor 1990]

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The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



How to Silence the Scriptures

by Soren Kierkegaard

The witty and devout Soren Kierkegaard (a Danish theologian and religious writer who lived between 1813-1855) is sometimes difficult to spot in his "thick" philosophical writings. The following is a condensed excerpt from the chapter "Kill the Commentators!"

Today's mass of Bible interpreters have damaged, more than they have helped, our understanding of the Bible. In reading the scholars, it has become necessary to do as one does at a play where a profusion of spectators and spotlights prevent, as it were, our enjoyment of the play itself, and instead we are treated to little incidents. To see the play, one has to overlook them, if possible, or enter by a way that has not been blocked. The commentator has indeed become a most hazardous meddler.

Of course, the commentators are not the only ones at fault. God wants to force each one of us out again into the essential, back to a childlike beginning. But being naked before God in this way, this we do not want at all. We all prefer the commentaries. So with each passing generation we grow more and more spiritless.

The current emphasis on getting back to the Bible has, sadly, created religiosity out of learning and literalistic

chicanery – a sheer diversion. Tragically this kind of knowledge has gradually trickled down to the masses so that no one can read the Bible simply anymore. All our Bible learning has become nothing but a fortress of excuses and escapes.

When it comes to existence, to obedience, there is always something else we have to first take care of. We live under the illusion that we must first have the interpretation right or the belief in perfect form before we can begin to live – that is, we never get around to doing what the Word says.

The church has long needed a prophet who in fear and trembling had the courage to forbid people to read the Bible. I am tempted, therefore, to make the following proposal. Let us collect all the Bibles and bring them out to an open place or up on a mountain and then, while we all kneel, let someone talk to God in this manner: "Take this book back again. We Christians, such as we are, are not fit to involve ourselves with such a thing: it only makes us proud and unhappy. We are not ready for it."

I open the New Testament and read, "If you want to be perfect, then sell all your goods and give to the poor and come follow me." Good God, if we were to actually do this, all the capitalists, the office-holders, and the entrepreneurs, the whole society in fact, would be almost beggars! We would be sunk if it were not for Christian scholarship! Praise be to everyone who works to consolidate the reputation of Christian scholarship, which helps restrain the New Testament, this confounded book which would one, two, three, run us all down if it got loose (that is, if Christian scholarship did not restrain it).

It is true that we Protestants go to great efforts so that every person can have the Bible – even in their own tongue. Ah, but what efforts we take to impress upon everyone that it can be understood only through Christian scholarship! This is our current situation.

What I have tried to show here is easily stated: I have wanted to make people aware and admit that I find the New Testament very easy to understand, but thus far I have found it tremendously difficult to act literally upon what it so plainly says. I perhaps could take another direction and invent a new kind of scholarship, bringing forth yet one more commentary, but I am much more satisfied with what I have done – made a confession about myself.

[Excerpt from [Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard](#), Chapter 56, *Killing the Commentators!* edited by Charles E. Moore, [Plough Publishing](#), Used with permission.]

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The Divine Power and Promises of God (2 Peter 1:3–4)

by Dr. Daniel A. Keating

The following brief commentary from the Second Letter of Peter, Chapter 1 is excerpted from the book, *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude*, by Dr. Daniel Keating, published by Baker Academic, 2011. While it was written from a Roman Catholic perspective, the material can be beneficial for Christians from other traditions as well. – ed.

Utter dependability of God's Word

In this first main section of the letter Peter's goal is to set his audience on a firm foundation by reminding them of the truth. Like a good builder he begins with the foundation, which is what God has already done for us (vv. 3–4). Then he moves on to describe the progress that they ought to be making in virtue (vv. 5–11). Finally, he assures them of the reliability of God's Word and the sure promise of Christ's return (vv. 12–21). In short, Peter sums up for us where we have come from, how we should be making progress, and where we are headed. Everything he says here is governed by the power of God and the utter dependability of his Word.

3 His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and devotion, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and power. 4 Through these, he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature, after escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire.

NT references: 2 Corinthians 13:13; Philippians 2:1;
Hebrews 6:4; 12:10; 1 John 2:16

v. 3: Peter opens with broad strokes: **His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and devotion.** The subject of “his” is most likely God the Father – it is by his power that we have been granted “everything” pertaining to true spiritual life and godly living. Peter assures us that by God’s own power everything we need for a godly life has already been granted to us. “Devotion” ¹ is a key term for 2 Peter (see also 1:6, 7; 3:11), denoting the practice of a way of life pleasing to God in all respects.

How did God’s power come to us? **Through the knowledge of him who called us.** This is most probably a reference to Jesus. We have come into “everything” through one Person – through Christ – and our knowledge of him, both knowledge of who he is and the way of life that he teaches.

How did Christ call us? **By his own glory and power.** “Power” is literally “virtue,” or “excellence.” There are two possible ways to understand this. Christ has called us either *by* his own glory and excellence (NAB), that is, by means of his saving work, or he has called us *to* his own glory and excellence (RSV), that is, to share in his own glory and power. The first is the means, the second is the goal. Both in fact are true. It is *by* his glory and excellence that we are called, not by our own efforts, yet he also calls us to share in his own glory and excellence, as verses 4–8 will make clear.

v. 4: Peter continues: **Through these, he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises.** “These” refers back to Christ’s “glory and power” and the knowledge we have gained through them. In summary, we have come to know Christ Jesus, and through this knowledge and by his power he has begun the fulfillment of his very great promises that will be fulfilled completely in the age to come. As we shall see, these promises refer both to the prophetic predictions in the Old Testament and to the words of Jesus himself. The use of the perfect tense here, “has bestowed,” shows the permanence and finality of the promises that have been given to us. They are stable and certain, and we can fully rely on them.

What is the purpose of these promises? **That through them you may come to share in the divine nature,** literally, that “you may become partakers of the divine nature.” This is perhaps the most debated and controversial phrase in the entire letter. Some commentators, past and present, believe that the phrase “partakers of the divine nature” shows clear signs of a Hellenistic worldview in which salvation means fleeing from this material world and being joined in a pantheistic way to the divinity. Others, wishing to rule out this interpretation, reduce the phrase “partakers of the divine nature” to mean nothing more than an ethical life lived by the power of grace.

Here I believe we can look both to the New Testament and to the Christian tradition for a better and more accurate way of understanding this wonderful and perplexing phrase. The New Testament often uses the language of “sharing,” “participation,” and “communion” when referring to our life with God. For example, we are called to share in God’s own holiness (Hebrews 12:10); we are made “partakers” of the Holy Spirit

(Hebrews 6:4) and have “communion” with the Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:13; Philippians 2:1); and we have “communion” with Christ in the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist (1 Corinthians 10:16). Christian life is not just something we do – that is, ethics – but is grounded in a real communion with God, a sharing in his own life.

To become partakers of the divine nature, then, does not mean that we become God by nature but that we have a real share in God’s own life and power – a life and power that enables us to know him, hear his Word, follow his teaching, and live a way of life pleasing to him. In the Christian tradition, 2 Peter 1:4 is normally understood to refer to God’s life that comes to us through faith and baptism, that increases in us day by day as we live out a way of life in communion with him, and that comes to completion when we are fully transformed and divinized in eternal life. It is important to recognize that the beginning of this participation in the divine life is already underway.

We can become partakers of the divine nature only **after escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire**. Peter is not saying that we must flee from the world itself, but from the *corruption* that is in the world because of disordered desire. “Desire”² in 2 Peter always has the connotation of “sinful desire” (1:4; 2:10, 18; 3:3; see 1 John 2:16). “Corruption” here carries primarily a moral meaning. When human beings follow their sinful desires, the result is a corrupt way of life, a disfigured human society. Peter is telling us that we need to flee from this sinful pattern of life.

In short, Peter is describing in verses 3–4 what happens for Christians when they turn away from sin, put their faith in Christ, undergo baptism, and receive God’s power and life through the Holy Spirit. Having escaped from the corruption in the world through our incorporation into Christ, we have been given a share in God’s own divine life, and now are called to exert ourselves to make our “call and election firm” (1:10).

Reflection and application (1:3–4)

The problem with most of us is not that we aim too high but that we expect too little. We underestimate what God wants to do for us and what he wants us to do for him. We see the faith as a set of demands, as a bar that we must clear, and so we try a little harder and hope to jump a little higher. But the gospel expressed here in 2 Peter is very different than this. It begins with the good news that God has already given to us freely all that we need to live for him. And it tells us that the goal is nothing less than becoming “partakers of the divine nature.”

Day-to-day progress can seem slow, and we wonder whether we can ever reach the goal. Our own enthusiasm quickly ebbs and fails. This is why the opening of 2 Peter is so crucial. To know that “his divine power” is at work energizes us to “make every effort” (vv. 3, 5). Conviction that he has already made us partakers of the divine nature emboldens us to press on to see this work completed.

In my own life the awakening to God’s call only came about when I invited the Holy Spirit to act more deeply in me. As I began to experience God’s presence and power, my faith increased, my understanding of spiritual things sprouted and grew, and I started to grasp just how much I had to change to become like Christ.

When we come to know experientially God’s divine power at work within us, we are encouraged to make every effort to see this work of God in us come to completion.

Notes

¹ Greek *eusebia*

[2](#) Greek epithymia

[3](#) The

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The Christian Meaning of the Psalms

by Jeanne Kun

Our Jewish forefathers gave expression to their faith in God through the psalms and were gripped by a profound awareness of what it means to stand as mere creatures before the presence of God. As Christians, we have made their words our own, praying the psalms unchanged, for we have the same joy in the Lord, the same hope of deliverance, the same confidence in appealing to his mercy. However, we pray the psalms with an added richness because of our awareness of their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. They become more meaningful to us as we interpret them in light of the revelation of the new covenant.

The New Testament is the fulfillment of what is foreshadowed and prefigured in the Jewish Scriptures, known to Christians as the Old Testament. Recognizing this helps us to more easily understand and interpret both parts of the Bible. Many of the realities of the Old Testament are “types” of greater realities that are only fully revealed in the New Testament. The people, events, and institutions of the Old Testament have meaning in themselves, as parts of the unfolding of God’s plan. But these same people, events, and institutions are also foreshadowings of people, events, and institutions that constitute the final unveiling of God’s plan, his new covenant. In particular, many elements of the old covenant point the way to Jesus Christ, who is the new covenant.

The better we understand the old covenant and are able to interpret its types or shadows, the better we will be able to understand the new covenant. The psalms are one of the primary places in the Old Testament where we are able to see and understand the types in their original or immediate context and yet at the same time move beyond this

immediate meaning to the greater spiritual reality they foreshadow.

A brief overview of God's action throughout salvation history helps clarify this and bring it into perspective. From the beginning, God's constant desire for mankind has been to unite us to himself as his sons and daughters. After the fall of Adam, God continued to work toward this purpose. He called Abraham to follow him and made Abraham the father of faith. God established a people and blessed them with a land of their own and a covenant, after delivering them by the leadership of Moses. God made them a priestly people who offered sacrifice to him, lived under the kingship of David, and awaited the day of the Lord and the coming of the Messiah. The psalms were written within the context of this salvation history and are full of references to all that identified Israel as a distinct people with a culture and heritage of their own—land, army, king, enemies, temple worship, sacrifice, covenant, priesthood. These elements not only have meaning in themselves, but are also types of what was to come in the revelation brought by Jesus Christ. They foreshadowed greater truths. They are elements that make up the psalms, but also elements that point beyond themselves.

With the Incarnation of Jesus, his first coming to us as the Word-made-flesh, we see the fulfillment of all that was foreshadowed in the Israel of old. Jesus is the new Adam. He is also the new Moses, the great high priest, and the anointed king or Messiah. Instead of having territorial land as in the era of the psalms, we, the new people of God, know our heritage as sons and daughters of God, and we know God's reign over the earth. Instead of fighting with physical armies against enemies, as on the battlefield of Israel, we victoriously pray the warrior's psalm (Psalm 144) as we engage in warfare against Satan and his hosts who are out to destroy God's people. The Temple is now present in the body of Christ, and Jesus is both high priest and holocaust. He has offered the greatest and perfect sacrifice for us on the cross. Ancient Zion foreshadowed the city of God, the New Jerusalem to come down from heaven. So it is with profound joy and anticipation that we exclaim, "I was glad when they said to me, / 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!' / Our feet are standing / within your gates, O Jerusalem!" (Psalm 122:1-2). It is there that we see Jesus, descended from David, enthroned as king forever (Psalm 110).

Thus, all the ancient types or prefigurements, full of meaning as they were in their original setting, are fully realized in the Incarnation of Jesus and will be finally accomplished with his second coming. Interpreting the psalms with this awareness—grasping their prophetic content and the significance of the typology presented in them—makes it possible for us as Christians to pray them wholly unaltered from their original Hebrew form but with a new depth of meaning. Our voices repeat the words of the Israelites before us, yet the words now resound with a fullness that has come to us by our redemption in Jesus Christ.

Making the Psalms Our Own

By this Christian interpretation, we make the psalms our own and join with Christ in his own prayer. When we pray the psalms, whether alone or with fellow Christians, we participate in the prayer of the Church, God's people. We share the psalms in common as members of the body of Christ—in some of them, speaking the same prayers Christ himself offered to the Father; in others, hearing the Father's words addressed to us about his Son and acknowledging Jesus as our Lord.

Whether we pray the responsorial psalm in the daily lectionary readings, select a psalm randomly, or use some other format for incorporating them into our time of prayer, we should try to pray all the psalms over a period of time. The repeated praying of psalms, whether or not it suits our mood or frame of mind at the moment, is what teaches us how to pray. The psalms give us a concrete experience of offering to God daily worship and praise. Just as the priestly people of Israel offered a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in the courts of the Lord (for example, Psalms 5:3; 66:13-15; 116:17-19; 118:19, 26), we, too, are servants of God offering this same sort of service of worship and sacrifice. And the psalms, inspired as they are by the Spirit of God and prayed by Jesus himself, can shape our own

prayer and form our attitudes in practical Christian living.

For example, praying the penitential psalms can deepen our recognition of our human frailty and inclination to sin and, in addition, form our minds in the proper attitude to take before the Lord in repentance. An understanding of how to repent is instilled in us and is a great aid in times when we need to turn away from specific sins. Similarly, we can learn from the psalms responses of joy, praise, and gratitude to God for his constant goodness without relying on an emotional high to express them.

More important, however, than a proper technique or method with which to pray the palms, is to simply give ourselves over to them, making them our own prayer that rises spontaneously and repeatedly to our lips and allows them to take hold of our hearts. When we do so, we will discover that, as the well-known Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, “God will give Himself to us through the Psalter if we give ourselves to Him without reserve, in our recitation of the Psalms.” And, as Merton explained, this only requires “a pure faith and an intense desire of love and above all a firm hope of finding God hidden in His revealed word.”

> See also [Wisdom Psalms: Happy Are Those...](#) by Jeanne Kun

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior woman leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. This article is excerpted from [The Psalms: Gateway to Prayer](#), by Jeanne Kun (Copyright © 2013 by The Word Among Us Press). Used with permission. This book can be purchased from [The Word Among Us Press](#).

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August/September 2013 - Vol. 69



Wisdom Psalms:

“Happy Are Those...”

By Jeanne Kun

The collection of psalms found in Scripture, composed as it was under the divine inspiration, has from the very beginnings of the Church shown a wonderful power to foster devotion among Christians.

– Pope St. Pius X

The Book of Psalms is a collection of sacred songs reflecting the prayers, praises, longings, laments, and aspirations that have moved the hearts of Jews and Christians in their communion with God for centuries. The collection grew by slow stages, over a period of at least six hundred years of ancient Israel’s history, and when it was “closed,” the final form consisted of 150 psalms, as it does today. The psalm deliberately placed at the beginning of the collection serves as a “gateway,” or preface, to the entire Book of Psalms. In fact, Psalm 1 may have been specifically composed for that purpose, to guide readers into the path that leads to a truly blessed and happy life.

Many psalms—among them, 1, 19, 37, 49, 78, 112, 119,

Psalm 1:1-6

1 Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
2 but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
3 They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

4 The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the
judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD.
2 Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
3 who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.
4 You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
5 O 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 ordinances.
8 I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.

In the Spotlight

127, and 128—share the stylistic features and themes of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, which includes the books of Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, and Sirach. Wisdom literature frequently contrasts the virtues of the “righteous” (the just or good) and the vices of the “wicked” (the unjust or evil). It also extols the excellence of the divine “law of the Lord”—*torah*, in Hebrew—and the benefits derived from adhering to it. Characteristically, its subject matter is instructive in tone and its composition formal.

It’s notable that Psalm 1 opens with the expression “Happy (or blessed) are those,” words that are found at least twenty-five more times throughout the psalms. These words are a beatitude that points to what a person needs to *avoid* as well as do in order to find happiness. The psalm’s first verse anticipates Jesus’ beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-11), which describe the “blessed” who belong to the Kingdom of heaven and also serve as a preface to his entire Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29).

As a reflection on blessedness and righteousness, Psalm 1 is addressed to the reader rather than to God. Two ways are sharply contrasted: the path of the righteous who delight in keeping the law of the Lord and prosper and the path of the wicked who perish.

Let’s take our cue from Psalm 1, the gateway to the whole Book of Psalms, and meditate on the law of the Lord day and night.

The law of the Lord includes not only God’s commandments but his “revelation,” that is, the record of his acts of love to the people of Israel and the promises that he has communicated to them. Following the law is not burdensome but rather brings to those who keep it joy and delight (verses 1-2). Those who are righteous recognize the *torah* as the standard by which they are to live. Psalm 119, perhaps the best known of the Wisdom psalms, beautifully illustrates with the force of repetition this theme introduced in Psalm 1.

Psalm 119, a Launching-Pad for Prayer

Psalm 119 is the longest of the psalms. Its 176 verses are divided into twenty-two strophes or stanzas of eight verses each. Each strophe begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (which consists of twenty-two letters, from Aleph to Tau), and the first word of each of strophe’s eight verses begins with this same letter. Through continual repetition, the entire psalm highlights one theme: being rooted and anchored in the torah—God’s revelation, instructions, promises, words, and covenant.

Appreciation of this psalm [119] is a good test of one’s understanding of the psalms as prayers. From the literary point of view, it does not reach a high level. It is monotonous, repetitious. . . . In short, the style is pedestrian, the construction mechanical, the thought-content unoriginal and meager.

And yet, rightly considered as a religious text, this is a great composition. It is intended to be a foundation or starting-point for personal prayer. In this it corresponds somewhat to the Rosary, and its ABC has the function of our “beads.” Deliberately, the same simple ideas and aspirations are repeated over and over, to help the mind of the one reciting it to concentrate on one thought, and to rouse his heart to aspirations of love. Individual verses, with their simple affirmation or urgent appeals, are not meant to be intellectually analyzed and studied (though, as a matter of fact, in their very simplicity they are rich in implications, and a whole theology could be constructed from this psalm). The author . . . undertook to build a launching-pad, from which the devout soul might soar to loving contemplation of the unthinkable goodness of God. He knew what he meant to do, and he did it well.

—R.A.F. MacKenzie, SJ

Understand!

1. What negative practices do those who are “happy”—that is, the blessed righteous—avoid in Psalm 1:1? What positive actions and attitudes identify a just person?

2. Note the verbs in the opening verse of Psalm 1. Describe in your own words how these verbs illustrate



They who are “happy” are compared to a tree, a symbol of prosperity and well-being. With roots reaching to streams of water, it flourishes and bears “fruit in season” (Psalm 1:3). Most likely, this fruit means wisdom gained by good living and used for the benefit of others. Centuries later, Jesus used a similar illustration: “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit” (Luke 6:43).

The latter half of Psalm 1 describes the fate of those who ignore God’s revelation and reject his love: The “wicked” are like “chaff that the wind drives away” (verse 4). In ancient Israel the winnowing process was used to thresh out grain. First, the stalks of wheat were trod underfoot by oxen or people; then, this straw was thrown in the air over the threshing floor, which was usually a breezy mound. The heads of grain, loosened by the treading, fell to the floor and were gathered in, while the light, useless chaff was blown away by the wind. The psalmist’s vivid imagery warns us against such a fate!

Let’s take our cue from Psalm 1, the gateway to the whole Book of Psalms, and meditate on the law of the Lord day and night (verse 2), pondering God’s revelation and instructions to us. As Cistercian monk and scholar M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, pointed out, “It is with the rich promise of the first Psalm, ‘Blessed Are They,’ that we enter the Psalter, knowing that the time we spend with it—be it during the quiet of the night or the pauses in the midst of the labors of the day—will be among the most fruitful of our lives.” (*Psalms: A Spiritual Commentary*)

And as we read, pray, and reflect on the psalms that lie

successive stages in moving away from the right path.

3. Read Jeremiah 17:7-8 and compare the prophet’s description with that of the psalmist in Psalm 1:3. What additional insights do you gain from Jeremiah? What can you learn from this image drawn from nature?

4. What does Psalm 1 indicate about the condition and lot of those who do not follow God’s way? What consequences do the “wicked” face?

5. What nouns does the psalmist use in Psalm 119:1-8 to variously describe God’s law? How do these synonyms expand your understanding of torah? What phrases describe the psalmist’s attitude and response to God’s law? In your opinion, is the technique of repetition effective in Psalm 119? Explain your answer.

Grow!

1. Whom do you associate with? Whom or what do you listen to? What do you look at? What choices are you frequently confronted with in your daily life? Recall an instance when you chose to act righteously in the face of temptation to go the “way of the wicked.” In what way(s) did you experience the “happiness” of those who follow God’s law?

2. How often do you take time to meditate on the “law of the LORD” (Psalm 1:2)? What value do you find in this practice? What might you do to make reading and meditating on Scripture a more meaningful part of your life?

3. Do you think your life corresponds to the psalmist’s image of a tree planted by streams of water (Psalm 1:3)? Why or why not? What fruits are you bearing? How are others benefiting from this fruit?

4. What personal message does Psalm 1 hold for you? How can you put this message into practice in your life?

5. Read Psalm 119:1-8 and ponder a few of the phrases found in it that describe God’s law and our relationship to it. What is your response to this psalm? Do you “delight” in God’s law or do you experience following God’s ways as a burden that weighs you down? Explain your answer.

before us in this study, may we come to treasure the great riches we discover there!

In the Spotlight

The Poetic Artistry of the Hebrew Psalms

The psalms are poems, but some of the original qualities of Hebrew poetry are not apparent when translated into other languages. For example, a technique of Hebrew poetry favored in the Wisdom literature and Wisdom psalms is the “acrostic” or alphabetical construction in which successive verses or groups of verses (stanzas or strophes) begin with the twenty-two successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This technique is highly developed in Psalm 119 and in the Book of Lamentations. Other examples of psalms that employ an acrostic structure are 9, 25, 34, 37, 111, and 145.

Parallelism is another dominant aspect of the beauty and nature of Hebrew poetry—and fortunately, parallelism comes through strongly even in translation and can be appreciated in any language. In this technique, the content of one line of the psalm is parallel to—that is, corresponds to—the content of another. (The verse-unit of two phrases is called a distich, and a unit of three lines is a tristich.)

Frequently the parallelism balances the same thought in a comparison that is highlighted by the repetition of the thought, as in the following examples from Psalm 96:6-8:

Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name.

Parallel balance may also be seen in a contrast of ideas or in two opposite thoughts: “in the morning [grass] flourishes and is renewed; / in the evening it fades and withers (Psalm 90:6).

As you read the psalms throughout the course of this study, be alert to their wording and structure and you will grow in your appreciation of their artistry as Hebrew poems.

In the Spotlight

A Psalm Is Delightful to Our Soul

Reflect!

1. Reflect on Psalm 1 as the gateway and preface to the Book of Psalms. What do these descriptions tell you about the role and importance of this psalm? About the significance of the whole Book of Psalms? Keep these ideas in mind as you read and pray the psalms in this study guide.

2. Reflect on the following Scripture passages that encourage us to walk in the way of the Lord and the path of the just:

Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: . . . See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deuteronomy 29:2; 30:15-20)

Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of evildoers.

Avoid it; do not go on it;
turn away from it and pass on.

For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;
they are robbed of sleep unless they have made
someone stumble.

For they eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.

But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what they stumble over. (Proverbs
4:14-19)

The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation,

All the books of Scripture, both Old Testament and New, are inspired by God and useful for instruction, as the apostle says (2 Timothy 3:16), but to those who really study it, the Psalter yields special treasure. . . . For I think that in the words of this book, all human life is covered, with all its states and thoughts, and that nothing further can be found in man. For no matter what you seek, whether it be repentance and confession, or help in trouble and temptation or under persecution, whether you have been set free from plots and shares or, on the contrary, are sad for any reason, or whether, seeing yourself progressing and your enemy cast down, you want to praise and thank and bless the Lord, each of these things the divine psalms show you how to do, and in every case the words you want are written down for you, and you can say them as your own.

—St. Athanasius of Alexandria

In the same way that food is tasty, a psalm is delightful to the soul. It also needs to be chewed. If you swallow a psalm hastily in one gulp, you will miss the sweet taste. “They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb” (Psalm 19:10). Devotion can drip from the words of a psalm. “I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind. I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind” (1 Corinthians 14:15). Attentive devotion is imperative. It is not possible that those who are pleased with our earthly prayers will ignore us in heaven.

—St. Bernard of Clairvaux

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> [See other articles by Jeanne Kun](#)

Illustration at top: by Kevin Carden

and gladness and a crown of rejoicing.
The fear of the Lord delights the heart,
and gives gladness and joy and long life.
Those who fear the Lord will have a happy end;
on the day of their death they will be blessed. (Sirach 1:11-13)

Act!

Memorizing psalms is an ancient Christian custom. When we commit something to memory, we know it “by heart.” Thus, we can spontaneously pray psalms that we have memorized as occasions and the events and needs of daily life move us, even when we don’t have a Bible or psalter at hand. As Rev. Ben Patterson advises:

Memorize the Psalms—but not by rote. Rather, learn them by heart; make their words your words. Come to understand them so well you can recite them—by inflection and tone—as though you had written them yourself. This is, by far, the best way I know to learn to pray the Psalms. I can think of no more powerful way to allow the Word of God to change who you are and how you think. Over the years I have been grateful for every line of Scripture I have committed to memory, but the prayers of the Psalms have offered incomparable comfort and clarity in desperate, murky, and confusing situations, when I didn’t have a worthwhile word of my own to say—when I quite literally didn’t have a prayer. (*God's Prayer Book*)

Choose a psalm, perhaps your favorite or one that speaks to a current need, and memorize it. During the coming week, pray this psalm from memory frequently so that its words truly become your own.

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The Word of God Is Living and Active – Hebrews 4:12



Controlled by the Love of Christ

by Tadhg Lynch

For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. - 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

The call of the Lord as expressed by the apostle Paul in Second Corinthians is straightforward. He writes that “we are convinced that one has died for all”.

Through our lives in covenant community we are called to follow this teaching. We teach about service; about the necessity of finding a place in the body where we are not merely “contributing” and “expressing” but where we are really (in a small way) experiencing some cost. We teach about embracing humility, lowliness and suffering as a means to cultivate the desire to “lay down [our]...life for one’s friends” and to encourage a life where we “honor one another above yourselves”. We also teach the call to imitate Christ in his life of personal sacrifice and death on the cross.

As the church moves forward in her mission today, we may often be discouraged by what we see around us. Christians in many parts of the world, and some of our own brothers and sisters in the Middle East and elsewhere, experience intimidation, harassment, and persecution for their faith and the life of Christian

discipleship they seek to live. Many of our church traditions grapple with public scandal over past and present sins or suffer their moral and doctrinal teaching to conform to the standards of the world, seemingly incapable of presenting the truth through the ever more capricious lens of the media. The politicians of my own country – the Republic of Ireland – have recently voted to legalize abortion and take the lives of those most needing protection in our society.

As I meet fellow Christians across this world, I see a similar pattern in disciples from all different churches, denominations, cultures and countries. Some have embraced the call of discipleship and have paid the cost. Some have not embraced it or have turned away.

In our Kairos evangelistic work with university students and other young people, I meet more and more who know something of Christ, and may even have a desire to live a life like his, but they seek to live it their way for themselves. Some days, this is the life that I live – a life that is controlled by the love of me and what I want. When I live life this way, Christ may be on my lips, he may be around my neck, or on my t-shirt, but he is not in my heart, mind, and soul. I meet more and more disciples like myself – we half crucified Christians – who know the cost we must pay, and willingly stand in line at the register, but gladly encourage those behind us to approach.

And then I meet Christians who are controlled by the love of Christ. They may look, act, and pray somewhat differently from one another, but they are united by the conviction that “one has died for us all; therefore all have died.” In this present world which has been described as “a culture of death,” they have chosen to live a Christ-centered life that is a kind of *living death* – praying, working, serving to bring the kingdom of God – gladly awaiting the time when they can lay down their own life and go to be with the Master for whom they have died a long time ago. Some days this is me – would that it were more and more.

I have not spent sufficient time in this present world to know whether our society is getting objectively worse. I grew up in an age where governments often seemed to pass laws which weakened traditional Christian morality and where a good sermon was something to be noted and commented on rather than expected. Those whose opinion and grey hairs I trust however, tell me that it is so, and I accept their wisdom and judgment.

One thing I do recognize, is that it is becoming easier and easier to spot the Christians who are *dying*, to see the men and women who live no longer for themselves but for him - the crucified and risen one. I believe that we who are called to covenant community, as well as all Christians, are faced with this same choice once. Most blindingly, terrifyingly, concretely, and ordinarily once – and (if we choose right) every day thereafter. To be part of a community, to attend a small group, or serve in an outreach is no guarantee that I have died and that Christ now continually lives in me. It is a help for sure, but no guarantee. I meet those in this world (many thankfully within our community movement) who are convinced, that one has died for them and that therefore they must die. They are often raising children, working in tax law, cleaning the fridge, and painting houses - and you can tell that they are dying all the same. You can tell because they look so alive. They don't seem like they're trying to talk to you about Christ but they do. You don't see the sacrifice of their difficult decisions about them, but you see the life of Christ that they are living.

This is our mission. To daily pick up our cross and walk as Christ has walked, and to bring his light and life to the world. As the world that does not know Christ darkens around us, we will find the call of discipleship quicker and easier to do if we have really died. But it will be slower, longer, and harder if we wish to postpone the cost or tarry in the darkness.

If we have died with Christ, we have no fear of what the world may do. Our only desire will be to save those in

it who hear and accept the message of eternal life. We have no real affinity with this present world, for it is passing away and our time here is fleeting. That it turns against us should neither surprise nor dismay. It can encourage us to redouble our efforts, knowing that each relationship we have built, each trust won, each testimony shared is not a wild hopeless shot into the darkness of a void but a blow with a hammer to a wall which will – through God's good work – eventually shatter to reveal the world which will never pass away.

We may lament the current state of this present world and its decline, but we must remember that this is not where we are supposed to finally live. The man who fights behind enemy lines gives no thought to the plants he tramples in pursuit of victory. He knows there is a garden kept for him to enjoy at home when the battle is won.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, theologian and martyr wrote simply in his spiritual classic – The Cost of Discipleship “*When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.*” Make it so in us, Lord Jesus.

[Tadhg Lynch is a member of the [Servants of the Word](#), a missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord, and a Mission Director for Kairos, an international outreach to young people. Tadhg is originally from Nazareth Community, Dublin, Ireland.]

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The King Provides

by Stephen Bick

About a week before I finished my [Kairos GAP](#) year of service in Lansing, Michigan, USA, Ruthie, the organizer of my youth project, found out that the name Vasily, which we both thought meant “King,” means not just that but “The King Provides”. If I’d discovered that midway through the year, I’d have said, “Why has he only provided Vasily then for our youth program? I wanted loads more kids to show up, and all I got was one guy.”

I marvel at that name now, and what He did provide.

I decided to do a Kairos GAP year because I wanted to go on an adventure, serve, live away from home and get some formation before I start university. I also wanted to live with the Servants of the Word [a missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord], not only because they’re great guys and I could benefit from learning a lot from them, they offered to cover my rent if I did some house work for them. Four of their houses outside Europe let guys do this: inner city of Detroit (where I’d probably be shot), Mexico (kidnapped), the Philippines (contract a rare tropical disease) and Lansing. The only danger in Lansing seemed to be living in, as one resident put it, “The second cloudiest city in the USA.” Sold. Here’s a brief description from a

fundraising letter I sent out to supporters in early August 2012, a few weeks before I arrived in Lansing:

One of these service areas [I plan to participate in] is the Asaph project, an after-school music club for kids (ages 4-11) in some low income housing projects in Lansing. While the music side of the project will be fun (especially for me, I'm going to study music in university after the year!) the point of Asaph is building relationships with the kids who attend and giving them some attention they may not be receiving at home.

Ruthie Munk, a young lady in the [Work of Christ community](#) in Lansing, started Asaph about 5 years ago to reach out to kids in her neighborhood. The idea is that we do games, music, some light evangelism and build some solid friendship relationships with whoever walks through the door. Many children in the area come from families where mothers have several children from several fathers. It was obvious that their moms loved them dearly and want the best for them. But, unfortunately for many of the kids I met, their fathers were mostly absent. That put an additional responsibility on me as a young man serving these fatherless boys in Asaph project. I may have not been the only man who has shown an older brother interest in these kids, but for some of them I was the only man who turned up every week for them.

Opposite the Pilgrim United Church of Christ, where we run the Asaph program, stands Bingham elementary school. For the first four years of Asaph's existence, children simply crossed the street on their way out of school and came to us. But shortly before I arrived Bingham school shut down for good. Students were sent to other elementary schools nearby, but, unfortunately, not very close to Asaph.

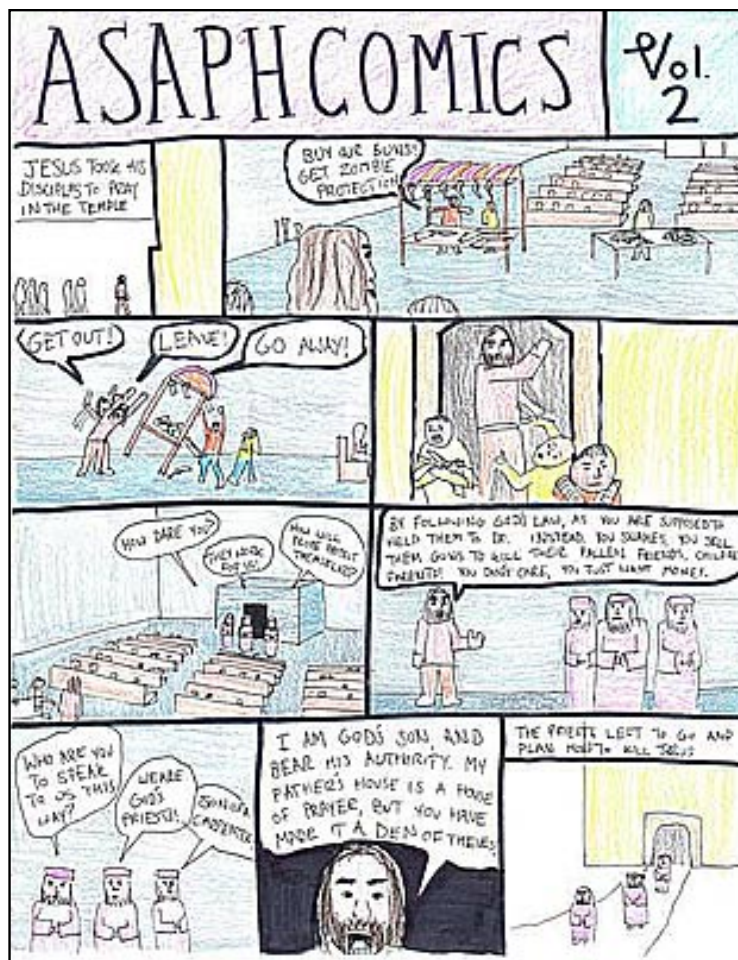


So after planning our term's theme, games, and other activities, we set up the room and went outside to throw a ball around and waited for some children to show up. A car pulled up and a boy walked out. He was called

Vasily, and had come to Asaph the previous year. We couldn't do the planned group activities with just one kid, so we did some other one-on-one games, taught Vasily a simple song, and then sat down for some snacks. Vasily then began to talk non-stop about zombies. Zombie movies, comics, and games had become something of a craze in recent years, especially among boys Vasily's age, and Vasily had really got into the craze. He talked about the zombie movies he had seen, which zombies were fast and which were slow, how humans might survive a zombie attack. After 20 minutes of Zombie movie replays, we asked Vasily if he would care to talk about something else. Also at this point I was a little disheartened that no one else has turned up for the Asaph project. I tried to assure myself that more kids would surely come. Next week - still just Vasily! He didn't seem to notice that Asaph had 5 staff members and only one kid (which is just as well, considering) but we played some games, had snacks and had a good time. He also had a passion for Calvin and Hobbes, perhaps the finest comic strip ever written, which all of us staff also loved to read. A few weeks went by with just the one boy showing up.

During this time I was also trying to get the hang of the Servants of the Word brother's prayer room. Each morning after breakfast, took some time together for common praise and worship and some intercessory prayer. During the first week I asked the guys to pray each morning for Asaph. But I didn't know often I could press the other guys to keep praying for Asaph? Maybe there was a limit to how many prayer requests one could ask each day or week, before one brothers would take me aside and say: 'Look, Stephen, there are other things to pray for!'

By the time Advent arrived we still had just Vasily. So our team met to discuss what we were going to do next term. Since we had a 5-1 staff-to-kid ratio, it did not strike us as a very fruitful venture, especially since the Work of Christ community was funding Asaph. We decided to continue the program until Spring Break, and then stop it unless more kids began to show up. In the meantime, Mara (the other gapper in Lansing) went to a few of the local schools to distribute flyers to recruit more kids. I was asked to prepare some kind of teaching program for youth. Even if we only went up to Spring break (late March), we still had around 40 sessions (twice a week) with Vasily. This gave me a good amount of time to communicate more of the gospel message with him. But I knew I had to find a more creative way to engaged him.



Well, I figured that the two things Vasily would be definitely interested in were comic books and zombies, so I started to draw a comic book about the Christmas story using a zombie character as a metaphor for sin. Starting with a “four spiritual laws” introduction to the Gospel message – the first spiritual truth being “God loves us, but we sinned deliberately became zombies.” The best part about the idea was the really clear link between sin and death, and one of the more obvious fruits of the comic metaphor was that by the end of the school year, Vasily didn’t think the devil was cool anymore. I drew 6 comics, going very roughly over salvation history up to Jesus’ birth: Creation, Fall, God forms a people, God gives them the law and a way of life (it’s not a perfect fix) – then the people of God wait for the Messiah to come. The comic strip presentation was a hit. So we decided to put on a zombie-themed Christmas party and sent out flyers around the neighborhood. We had a big game with Nerf guns and two new kids showed up. But they didn’t come back after Christmas break, so the numbers went back down to one.

When we returned after the Christmas break, we got into our regular routine for Asaph: We would first start each session by playing outside, in the hope that some kids would see us and want to join Asaph. After that we’d come inside, eat snacks, and then I’d read Vasily the week’s comic. This way I could explain a lot of what was really going on and he’d often ask me questions. A memorable reaction to the comic (beyond “can we play “Go, Ninja, Go!” now?” and “can there be more zombie fight scenes”) was when Jesus told the crowds to love their enemies: Vasily would say, “I’m not doing that, that’s really hard”. Finally, he was starting to be more attentive! If Jesus’ sayings are met with a shrug, then I know they haven’t gone in.



As Easter started to loom on the horizon, I tried to wrap up the story, and include Jesus' life and ministry. Some creative liberties had to be taken to make the allegory work: I put gun-sellers (to protect against zombies) in the temple, instead of pigeon-sellers. Jesus threw them out because the way back to God isn't animal sacrifice (or zombie control) but his own sacrifice. After introducing Herod as a baby-murderer right after Jesus was born, I kept him alive as a principal human enemy, who was in league with the devil ("The Zombie King") and promised to kill Jesus in exchange for peace with the zombies. Jesus' blood was the cure for the zombie virus, so when Herod puts him to death by tying him to the chain-link fence around the camp where God's people lived, zombies who bite him are healed, but Jesus eventually dies. I also fit in Pentecost, and a final comic which wrapped up the story and told readers (I drew a picture of Vasily, so he couldn't possibly not take the hint) that Jesus' salvation was freely available today, and told him that if he wanted to accept that, he just had to pray. He said he might do it later. That's ok, good seeds planted.

The final week of Asaph, beyond which we had to close unless more kids came, was exciting. On one hand, I was ready to quit: no one could say we hadn't put the effort in, but Asaph was discouraging, and I wanted to spend more time serving with University Christian Outreach (UCO) or with our high-school group. At the same time, I was excited to see what God would do. I remember Ruthie asking me how many kids were enough to keep it going. I pulled a number out of the air, "Five?" On the last day, we played outside as normal, some kind of group ball game. One by one, some kids started to walk onto the car park and join in. We'd never seen them before, and they just happened to walk by. By the time we went downstairs for snacks, we had six kids. More than enough to keep Asaph running. I don't remember the rest of the session much, but when I got back home, pretty tired, I made sure to praise and thank God for this. I didn't feel like it - I wanted to go to bed, but I thought if there was any time to praise him, it was now.

The kids came back next week, and for the rest of the semester. They didn't like the comic too much, but I read it at snack time all the same. It wasn't written for them, anyway. This is what I wrote in a blog post for that day:

Well, the big news is that we got not five but six kids today, on pretty much the last day we could make a decision. Praise the Lord for sending us kids. We're staying open. Who gets to live like this, being answered by the God who made the universe? Everyone who wants to! Praise him.

Asaph's staying open next year. The King provides indeed!

[Stephen Bick grew up in the [Antioch Community](#), along with his parents and siblings, in London, UK. This autumn he will attend Cambridge University, where he will study music and (hopefully) evangelize some fellow students.]

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The Gospel is True - Kairos EME update

by Paul Jordan

A while ago I was on the train to the airport heading to Dublin and got talking to a fellow passenger. He turned out to be a professor from the University of Leuven on his way to a conference in San Francisco, his diagrams neatly tucked under his arm in a cardboard tube:

What line of business are you in?, he asked.

I work for a Christian missionary organization - we mainly work with students.

Oh, you find them interested?

Actually, we do.

I was almost surprised at my own response, but my confidence is based on fact.

The Gospel is true; the message is compelling today as it was 2000 years ago. Seeing 150 young people in Poland gathered for our Kairos Spring Conference bore witness to that. I was honored to have the chance to have significant 'Kairos conversations' and prayer sessions with over 20 of them. I'm inspired and encouraged by their honesty, their openness to faith, their boldness to make difficult decisions. One young man's life has completely changed in the last year since he met his new master, but there is more to clear out, he explains. Another decides in prayer that he must forgive his father. Another rejoices as he hears God clearly speak to him for the first time.

We are trying to walk with them, giving courage and seeing with the eyes of the master. Jesus saw the tax collector in Levi, but he also saw the evangelist that he was to become in Matthew.

And this is why I am confident young people are interested. Who wouldn't be interested in a life-giving, hope filled, truth?

And that is why I love my job. For there is nothing more satisfying than helping young men and women discover their God given call.

[Paul Jordan is the Director of [Kairos Europe and the Middle East](#).]

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GAP Retreat - Servanthood - February 2013

by John Benedetto / Leuven, Belgium

After a 6 a.m. flight from Dublin, my first impression of Leuven consisted of a great Belgian welcome and a big, warm waffle with chocolate drizzled on top. What can I say; I was sold from the start. Unsurprisingly, our time in Belgium ended up having more substance to it than my initial experience.

The theme for the retreat was Servanthood, a topic hopefully not unfamiliar to Gappers. Our first major session was led by Paul Jordan; right away he talked about how servants need to take on the mind of their master in order to serve their master well.

It struck a chord with me that a servant must deny himself completely before he can serve as Christ calls him to serve. I think this left us with a very uneasy feeling, especially considering how radical a decision this is in today's culture. It was a challenge for us as servants seeking to go deeper in service!

On Thursday we took a trip to Ghent, where we had the opportunity to see a couple of stunning cathedrals and take a tour of a medieval castle built in the year 1180.

Throughout the week both the guys and the girls got a taste for what household life was like in Leuven. Niamh McFadden led the household experience for the female Gappers from the region who had a great time. Joe Fahd did an excellent job in giving each male Gapper an opportunity to lead the household in different ways. To top it all off, we spent Friday preparing for the Student Worker Outreach Training (SWOT) weekend where we were able to serve a training weekend for students workers from around the European region. The retreat was a great opportunity for us to grow closer as Gappers who have had to hurdle many of the same obstacles this year. All in all, the craic was had.

[John Benedetto is from Dexter, Michigan, USA.]



Kairos Spring Conference, Poland 2013

It was second time that the Kairos EME Spring Conference took place in Poland (the first was in 2008). This time, almost 140 people from many different countries and different communities of the Sword of the Spirit gathered together in Szczyrk. The topic of the conference was “Be holy for I’m holy”.

Holiness is...

During the Kairos Weekend (thanks to all the talks we heard) I realised that being holy is not believing in a 'pocket-sized God' (talking to Him and then putting Him back in our pocket). It's a belief in a Holy God who lives in me all the time and calls me to be holy as well. It takes courage to answer the call, courage to be a bit different from what the 'world' nowadays expects from us. It's a readiness to be 'a pencil in God's hand' and to have a close relationship with Him.

- by Kasia Solecka

The Mess-Makers

We did not wait long for a response from the youth. Some people felt God calling them to do something more for Him. They don't want to ask anymore what the community can do for them, but what they can do for community and for others.

An example of these “mess makers” in Poland are people from University Christian Outreach (UCO) Bielsko. This group in just one year grew by 400%. After running a Life in Spirit Seminars course lots of people joined in. This Thursday two brand new small groups started in UCO. And they are still new people coming. It is the youngest – so far – UCO in the region and its members have their mouths wide open in surprise because they can see how God’s word is being fulfilled.

First Fruits

The Holy Spirit is working! He is starting his work in Krakow, where just a few hours after the end of the conference in Szczyrk, the idea about creating a UCO Krakow occurred.

Be holy, for I am holy. As you can see, we are not waiting too long to see the fruit of this weekend, although this fruit still needs time and care to ripen. As Paul says in his letter to Corinthians: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

Looking at the UCOs around the world, you can see how the flame, that is in the UCO logo, is spreading around and is bringing light to the world. Here are people who are making a "holy mess," people who are opening the doors of their hearts widely, who are motivated by love, who are not waiting until tomorrow, but "shouting today from the highest mountains to the deepest valleys 'GOD IS ALIVE.'"

So we ask you – our brothers and sisters – to pray for us in Poland.

- Kinga Miklar

[Check out the [Kairos Europe and the Middle East](#) website for more updates and reports.]

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I'm Not Okay - Neither Are You... And That's Okay

by Sam Williamson

Thomas Jefferson was a man of his time. His age of reason denied the possibility of miracles. So he took his old Bible and an old pair of scissors, and he cut out any verse with a hint of the supernatural.

Modern Christians do the same thing, only ours is the age of therapy (we *like* miracles). We rescue the Bible, highlighting anything that makes us feel good, and ruthlessly amputating every verse about sin (except for the sin of feeling bad about ourselves).

We adopt the book, I'm Okay—You're Okay, baptize it, ordain it, and put it in the pulpit. Our new preacher skips any verse that questions our okay-ness, like:

- *If you then who are evil* know how to give good gifts to your children...
- For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but *inside you are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness...*
- *You serpents, you brood of vipers*, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?

We are modern day Jeffersonians, cutting, twisting, and distorting the Bible, forcing it to say only what we want to hear. And we wonder why the church is a mess.

The truth is: I'm not okay, and neither are you.

But let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater

Therapy addresses a need that many believers overlook. The world is filled with broken people. We are fearful, angry, insecure, and self-absorbed. That's on our good days.

Many of these adult problems come from painful, unaddressed childhood experiences. Perhaps we had an angry, frustrated father who dealt with his disappointments by verbal abuse. Then many of us grow up mistrusting any authority figure, even God.

And it's understandable.

Infants are born with soft bones that need the strengthening of dietary calcium. A lack of calcium causes rickets, bent and fragile bones. Likewise, infants are born with soft hearts that need emotional nutrition. Any lack of emotional calcium causes rickets of the heart, fear, anger, and authority mistrust.

Therapists ask adult patients to revisit childhood experiences of abuse or neglect. They ask the patient—as an adult—to see those experiences through mature eyes, and to recognize that the abuse or neglect was not their fault.

And it wasn't their fault. It's not that the child was perfect—none are—it's that God designed us to receive love even in our imperfections. When this love is missing, it is not the child's fault. Someone failed to feed us the nutrition needed for a strong heart.

A step too far

Many therapists (and quite a few Christians) go a step too far. To bolster self-confidence and self-esteem, they say, "You're a good person. I'm okay, you're okay."

This contradicts the Bible which says we are broken sinners. I understand why they say it. They've heard too many preachers scowl, "You are bad, wicked, and sinful; you have absolutely no value at all." This too contradicts scripture which claims every human soul is valuable because God's image is stamped on our very soul.

Modern therapy says we are valuable because we are good; scripture says we are of infinite value and precious in the eyes of God; but nowhere does it say we are okay.

The gospel is just different

At a public dinner, Jesus deals with a Pharisee and a prostitute. The Pharisee feels good about himself and the prostitute feels bad. Jesus doesn't commend the Pharisee's self-esteem, nor does he encourage the prostitute with an ephemeral, "Hey, you're okay."

Instead he praises the woman, "She loves greatly because she's been forgiven much" and he denounces the Pharisee who "loves little because he's been forgiven little."

The key to esteem (and loving others) isn't the arrogant, self-esteem of the Pharisee; it is the humble God-esteem of a person who was not okay but has been forgiven.

Forgiveness is the key to a transformed life, but forgiveness requires the essential first step, admitting we are not okay. Don't we get it? God's love is proven when he loves us before we're okay. Only that love gives unshakeable confidence:

God demonstrates his love for us by the fact that Christ died for us **while we were still sinners**

(Romans 5:8).

Logic, truth, and confidence

I recently read a book that describes a woman who couldn't come before God because she felt bad about herself. The authors' only solution was to try and build her self esteem. They said, "All she had to do was feel good about herself." Their logic was lacking and their theology was abysmal.

There is another way. Our problem isn't that we feel bad about ourselves—we might have very good reasons to feel so—the problem is our bad, unbiblical opinion of God. Like the man with one talent, we say, "I know you are a harsh God."

This is the opposite of the Biblical God who loves us so much he personally pays for all we've done that causes us to feel bad about ourselves, who died while we were sinners.

Where will you get more confidence: if you come before God because "you are okay," or if you come before God because he can love and forgive even before we're okay? "I'm okay—you're okay" burdens us with an unbearable load.

Next time we're tempted to take scissors and cut out a verse of the Bible that makes us feel bad, let's take out a highlighter instead. Let's meditate on that verse, and let it drive us to God. The more we've been forgiven, the more we'll love.

C.S. Lewis wrote that "Redeemed humanity will somehow be better than unfallen humanity." Let's find our unredeemed-ness and come to God with that.

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Sam Williamson grew up in Detroit, Michigan, USA. He is the son of a Presbyterian pastor and grandson of missionaries to China. He moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1975. He worked in London England from 1979 to 1982, helping to establish [Antioch](#), a member community of the Sword of the Spirit. After about twenty-five years as an executive at a software company in Ann Arbor he sensed God call him to something new. He left the software company in 2008 and now speaks at men's retreats, churches, and campus outreaches. He is married to Carla Williamson and they have four grown children and a growing number of grandchildren. He has a blog site, [Beliefs of the Heart](#), and can be reached at Sam@BeliefsOfTheHeart.com.



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Scenes from the Bible - new art series by David Kurani



Moses and the Burning Bush, watercolor, 62x46 cms, by David Kurani

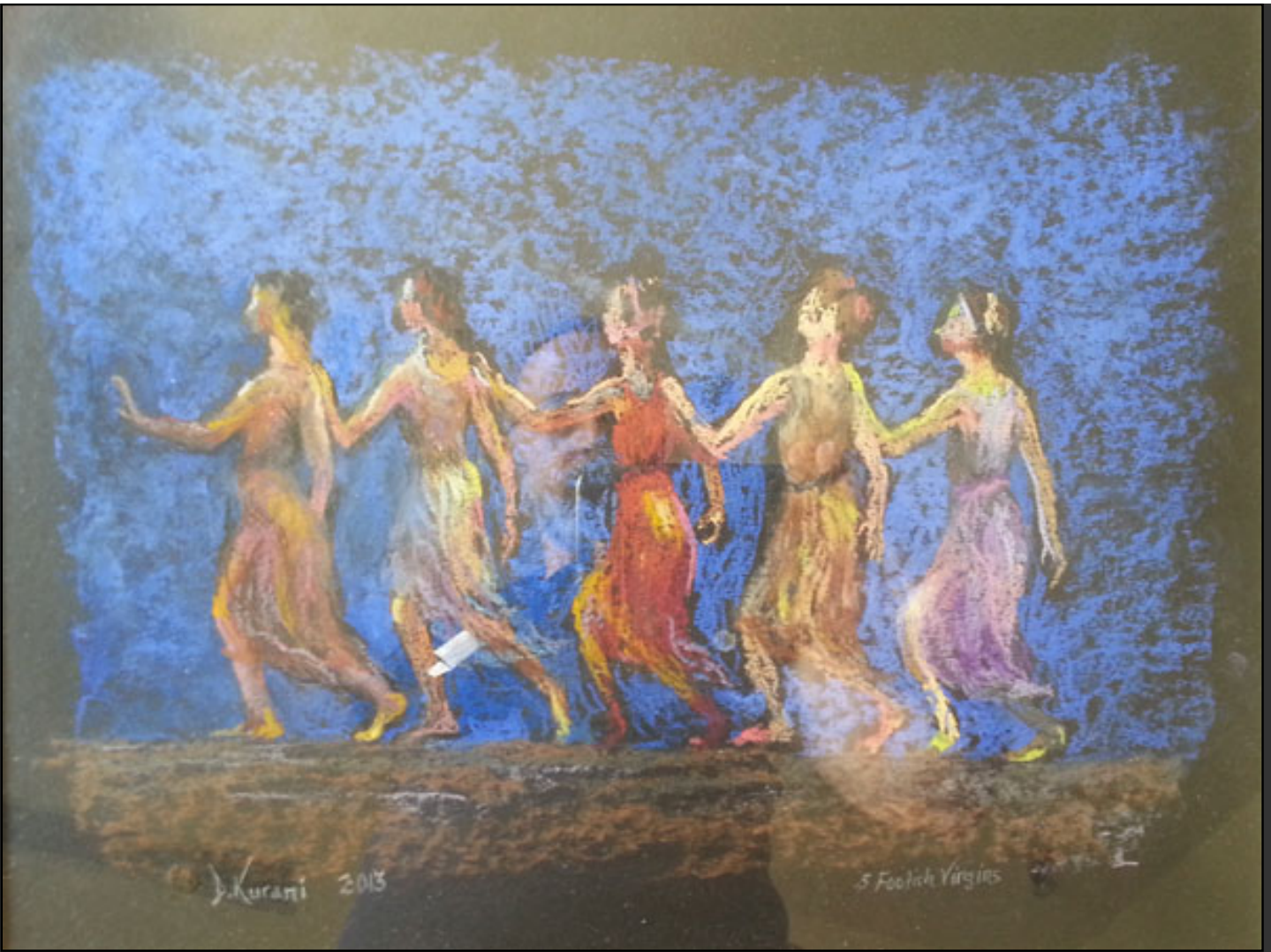
For many years, I found it challenging to paint biblically themed pictures. Aside from the reverence I felt towards the subjects, there was the matter of so many past masterpieces that did it so well. Lately, I have become more open to it, and a technical point seemed to encourage me in that direction too. The medium of watercolor is good at soft edges: useful for weather effects and therefore for light; so why not for supernatural light?



Elijah and Elisha, 46x62 cms, by David Kurani

How does one paint glory? Light seems like a natural way. The lights in our world here can suggest what heavenly light would look like if we could see it. Through art, we can paint light – differently from a camera.

The body positions in these paintings are meant to express emotions; kneeling for reverence, leaping for exhilaration, upraised arms for worship.



Five Foolish Virgins, pastel on black paper, 27x35 cms, by David Kurani

We're all in the middle of a story. History could be called "My-story" (but not quite "mystery", since we know what the end is.) The story of the five foolish virgins is one Jesus narrated. Here art conveys the absence of light. The poor girls are in the dark (aren't we all, sometimes?), and together – which is a comfort. It's only a small comfort, knowing the group of girls grips a guide who gropes (and gripes too, probably). Their situation is sad, but not completely; at least they have each other to hold on to. There's always comfort in community.

David Kurani is a noted Lebanese landscape artist. He teaches classes in art and theater at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. David has exhibited widely in art galleries and private collections throughout Lebanon, Europe, and the USA. He and his wife Gisele are active members of the People of God in Lebanon, a member community of the Sword of the Spirit.

Also see [previous art works](#) by [David Kurani](#)

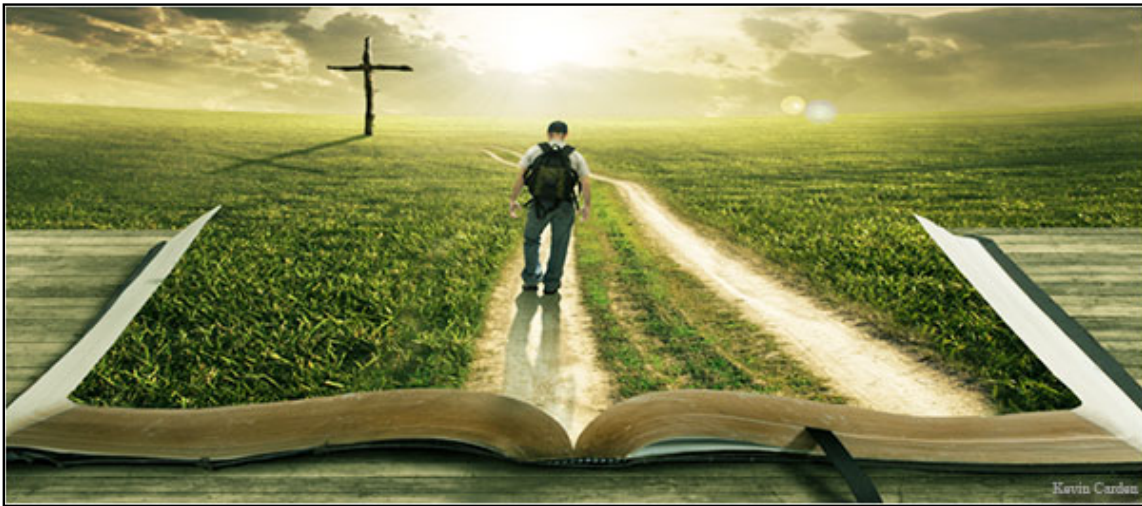
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LIVING BULWARK sources of strength and renewal for Christian life and mission

Scripture Study Course

Reading and Studying Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God



Scripture Study Course – Table of Contents

edited by Don Schwager

Do you want to know the mind and heart of God? And to grow in the knowledge of his truth and love? The Scriptures, also called the Holy Bible, are the living and active Word of God. God speaks to us through the inspired words of the Bible.

The following Scripture Study Course aims to help people read and study the Scriptures as God's word for us today. The goal of the study program is twofold: First, to help people understand the unity of the Scriptures - how the Old Testament prefigures and prepares the way for the coming of Christ in the New Testament, and how the New Testament fulfills and unveils the hidden meaning of the Old Testament. Second, to help readers better learn how to spiritually and prayerfully read the Scriptures as the living and active Word of God and at the same time interpret the Scriptures in a spiritual way, with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, that helps us apply the wisdom and truth of God's word to our daily lives.

1. The Unity of Scripture – One Word and One Spirit

- Presentation topics:
 - o [One Word and Spirit – Unity of the Old and New Testaments](#)
 - o [The Scriptures Are One Book in Christ](#): quotes from early church fathers
- Scripture verses from Old and New Testament: with questions for reflection and study
 - o [Isaiah 55:6-12 The fruit of God's word](#), and [Luke 8:8-15 Parable of the sower](#)
- Readings for study: A selection from Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox sources
 - o [How to Read the Bible](#), by Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware (2003)
 - o [God Speaks to Us in the Bible](#), by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1936)
 - o [You Can Understand the Bible](#), by Peter Kreeft (2005)
 - o [The Bible's Intrinsic Unity](#), by Pope Benedict XVI (2010)

- o [Christ in All the Scriptures](#), by Dr. John Yocum

2. The Sword of the Spirit – The Word that Pierces Mind and Heart

- Presentation topics:
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 - o [Isaiah 50:4b-5 and John 14:26 The Holy Spirit will teach you God's Word](#)
 - o [Hebrews 4:12 and Ephesians 6:17 The Sword of the Spirit is the Word of God](#)
- Readings for study:
 - o [Being Shaped by the Formational Power of Scripture](#), by M. Robert Mulholland Jr
 - o [Approaching Scripture as the Word of God](#), by J.I. Packer
 - o [Instructions in Daily Scripture Meditation](#), by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1936)
 - o [Not Letting Commentators Silence Scripture](#), by Soren Kierkegaard

3. Interpreting the Scriptures with Spiritual Wisdom

- Scripture verses from Old and New Testament: with questions for reflection and study
 - o [Psalm 119:9-18 Storing up God's word in our heart](#)
 - o [Luke 24:13-27,32 Jesus opens the Scriptures to us](#)
- Readings for study:
 - o [Every Page of the Bible is a Hymn to Christ](#), by Augustine of Hippo
 - o [A Guide to Discovering the Spiritual Meaning of the Scriptures](#), by Origen
 - o [The Spiritual Interpretation of the Bible](#), by Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa
 - o [Meditation on Psalm 119](#), by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1939/1940)

4. The Power and Authority of Scripture

- Scripture verses from Old and New Testament: with questions for reflection and study
 - o [Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and Matthew 22:36-40 The authority of the Word of God](#)
 - o [1 Peter 1: 22-25 The Power of God's living Word](#)
- Presentation topics:
 - o The nature of Scriptural authority and submission to Scripture
- Readings for study:
 - o [The Divine Power and Promises of God](#): 2 Peter 1:3-4, by Dr. Daniel Keating
 - o The Spirit, Force of the Word, by Raniero Cantalamessa
 - o [The Authority of Scripture](#), by Steve Clark

5. Signs, Symbols, and Figures that Foreshadow Christ's Work of Salvation

- Presentation topic:
 - o [Old Testament Types of Christ](#)
- Readings for study:
 - o [The Christian Meaning of the Psalms](#), by Jeanne Kun
 - o [Reading the Scriptures with the Early Church Fathers](#), by Don Schwager

6. Ruler of the Ages: The Stages of God's Plan in Scripture

- Presentation topic:
 - o [The stages of God's Plan](#), by Steve Clark
- Scripture verses from Old and New Testament: with questions for reflection and study
 - o [The Seven Ages of God's Covenant](#)
- Readings for study:
 - o On Scripture, by C.S. Lewis

[\[more materials and links will be uploaded soon\]](#)

- Gospel Signs and Miracles – Turning Water into Wine and Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes
- Gospel Signs and Encounters – Jesus Meets Nathaniel and Nicodemus (John 2-3)
- Gospel Signs and Encounters – Jesus Meets the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well (John 4)
- Gospel Signs and Encounters – Philip led by Spirit to the Samaritans and Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8)
- Developing Good Habits and Disciplined Approach to Daily Reading of Scripture
- A Unified Approach to Studying the Old Testament and New Testament
- Law and Grace – Old Testament and New Testament
- Wisdom and Virtue (Character Formation) – Old Testament and New Testament
- Revelation and Prophecy – Old Testament and New Testament
- The Parables of Jesus and the Jewish Approach to Parables in Biblical Times
- Tools for Scripture Study – Topical Studies, Word Studies, Bible Dictionaries and Commentaries

[Don Schwager is the author of the [Daily Scripture Readings and Meditation](#) and editor for [Living Bulwark](#).]

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom