

James Boice



WHY AND HOW TO  
STUDY THE BIBLE



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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# Why and How to Study the Bible

James Boice



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OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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1. THE PURPOSE OF BIBLE STUDY	1
2. THE PERVERSION OF BIBLE STUDY	9
3. UNDERSTANDING GOD'S BOOK	16
4. THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE WORD OF GOD	36

# 1

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## THE PURPOSE OF BIBLE STUDY

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It is not unusual in our day for men and women to have a low view of the Bible. Many persons, including professors of theology and ministers, feel that the Bible is man's word about God rather than God's word about man and so devalue it. Therefore, it is necessary to speak as Christ did, stressing the divine origin of the Bible and pointing out its supernatural characteristics.

At the same time, possessing a low view of Scripture is not the only error embraced by people today. Many misunderstand it. They do not know what it says or why it is written. As a result of this it is also necessary to speak of its purpose, which is above all else to reveal Christ Jesus.

What is the purpose of Scripture? According to Jesus Christ the purpose of the Scripture is to point to Him and reveal Him. Thus He said, "You diligently study the Scriptures, because you think by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39).

Have you seen this truth? Martin Luther is one who saw it clearly. For in a sermon he preached on this text, only months before his death, he argued:

Here Christ would indicate the principle reason why the Scripture was given by God. Men are to study and search it, to learn that he, Mary's Son, is the One who is able to give eternal life to all who come to him and believe on him. Therefore he who would correctly and profitably read Scripture should see to it that he finds Christ in it; then he finds life eternal without fail. On the other hand, if I do not so study and understand Moses and the prophets as to find that Christ came from heaven for the sake of my salvation, became man, suffered, died, was buried, and ascended to heaven so that through him I enjoy reconciliation with God, forgiveness of all my sins, grace, righteousness and life eternal, then my reading in Scripture is of no help whatsoever to my salvation. I may, of course, become a learned man by reading and studying Scripture and may preach what I have acquired; yet all this would do me no good whatsoever. For if I do not know and do not find the Christ, neither do I find salvation and eternal life. In fact, I find a bitter death; for our good God has decreed that no other name is given among men whereby they may be saved except the name of Jesus.

If you think about this purpose of Scripture for a moment, I am sure that you will see that it is an additional reason why the Bible must be divine in origin. The Bible was written over a period of about fifteen hundred years by about forty human authors. If the product of these men was no more than a human product, it is inconceivable that they could have agreed even on an outlook on life let alone on the grand purpose of God in history or the purpose of their book. Yet this agreement is precisely what we find. The only explanation is that, although the human writers did write out of their own perspective and out of their own historical environments, nevertheless, the God who stands behind the Bible so inspired their writings that the resulting words were inerrant and consistent. What is more, the combine result was, in an important sense, one book.

In John 5, therefore, it is no accident that, although Jesus does speak of Moses as having been responsible for part of the Bible

(John 5:45-47), he nevertheless begins with the statement that the Scriptures in their entirety are God's witness to his messianic claims. This is the course of the argument in the fifth chapter: God bears witness to Jesus (verses 30-32). He does so through the witness of John the Baptist (verses 33-35). He does so through Christ's miracles (verse 36). Above all, however, he does so through the Bible (verses 37-47).

We may sum up Christ's teaching in this chapter by saying that according to Jesus:

- The Bible is given by God.
- The purpose of the Bible is to point to Himself.
- To use the Bible in any other way is ultimately to misunderstand it and pervert its intention.

At this point one might find himself thinking along these lines: "You say that the purpose of the Bible (a Bible, I will admit, that is given by God) is to point to Jesus Christ. But how does it point to Him? Isn't the Bible mostly history? In the Old Testament, at least, doesn't it talk about anything but the Lord Jesus? How then can you say that it points to Him? How can He be its subject?" The answer to that question is that Jesus becomes the subject of the Old Testament in two ways:

1. by fitting in with its general themes
2. by fulfilling the specific prophecies to be found there

He becomes the subject of the New Testament in a far more obvious way, for the New Testament tells His story and is almost exclusively about Him.

Think, for instance, about the great themes of the Old Testament. What are they? Certainly one main theme is the sin of man and man's need. The Bible begins with the story of the creation. But no sooner is this story told (in the first two chapters of Genesis) than we are also told of man's fall. Instead of being humbly and gratefully dependent upon his Creator, as he should have been, man was soon in a state of rebellion against God. He



went his way instead of God's. So the consequences of sin and ultimately death passed upon the race.

In the rest of the Old Testament we see these consequences unfolding. Thus we have the murder of Abel, the corruption leading up to the flood, demonism, sexual perversions, eventually even great tragedy for the chosen nation of Israel in spite of great blessings. The people are carried off in slavery. Although some eventually return to the land of blessing, they return to a much less glorious existence. The Old Testament story is best summarized in David's great psalm of repentance, which ought properly to be the psalm of the whole human race: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. . . Surely, I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:1-3-5).

Here is one great biblical doctrine. But if we understand it right, even this doctrine is not an end in itself. It is true: the heart of man acknowledges it to be true. But the truth of man's sin and need is expounded in the Bible not merely for the sake of expounding a truth but rather because at the same time it is able to point to Christ as the solution to the dilemma.

We might get some idea of this aspect of the Bible's witness by thinking of it as a doctor's diagnosis. Here is a man who goes to the doctor complaining of nausea and abdominal pain. The doctor notes an area of tenderness in the groin, does a blood test, and diagnoses appendicitis. What is the purpose of the doctor's diagnosis? Is the telling of the truth the purpose? Well, yes, in a sense. That is one purpose, but it is not the ultimate purpose. The ultimate purpose is to get the man with the pain to the surgeon so that the threat of death may be averted. In the same way, the Bible diagnoses the spiritual condition of the race so that individual men, women and children might turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, for He is the only One who can cure their condition and bring healing. In this way Jesus becomes the theme even of the Old Testament diagnosis.



We might add that all who really believed in Old Testament times saw this. Thus, we have stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, the prophets, Anna, Simeon, John the Baptist, and others, all of whom placed their trust in the coming Redeemer and waited for Him.

This now leads us to the second great Old Testament theme, which is the existence of a God who acts in love to redeem sinful men. This God the Father Himself did in partial ways throughout the Old Testament period. At the same time, even as He did it, He pointed to the coming of His Son who would redeem men perfectly and forever.

Take the dealings of God with Adam and Eve on the occasion of their having sinned in the garden. Sin had separated the man and woman from the Creator. They tried to hide. God, however, came to them in the cool of the evening, calling. It is true that God spoke in judgment, as He had to do. He revealed the consequences of their sin. Still, at the same time that He spoke in judgment, He killed animals. He clothed the man and woman with skins, covering their shame. And He began His teaching of the way of salvation through sacrifice. In the same story He spoke to Satan revealing the coming of One who would one day defeat him forever. “. . .He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:16).

Nine chapters later we find another, somewhat veiled, reference to the “seed” who shall crush Satan. This is God’s first great promise to Abraham stressing that in him all would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). In chapter 22 it is restated like this, “And through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed. . .” (Genesis 22:18). The blessing referred to here is certainly not a blessing to come through all Jews indiscriminately, for even not all Jews are theists. It is not even a blessing to come through believing Jews. The blessing foretold is that which was to come through the seed of Abraham, the promised seed, the Messiah. Thus, years after the Apostle Paul, who knew this text, used it to show...

1. ...that the seed was the Lord Jesus
2. ...that the promise to Abraham was one of blessing through him

3. ...that the blessing was to come through Christ's great work of redemption.

In the Book of Numbers there is a very interesting prophecy spoken by the Lord through Balaam, that shifty, half-hearted prophet of Moses' day. Balak, a king who was hostile to Israel, had hired Balaam to curse the Jewish people. But every time Balaam opened his mouth, blessings on the people came out instead. On one occasion he said, "A star will come out of Jacob, and a scepter will rise out of Israel. . .A ruler will come and destroy the survivors of the city (Numbers 24:14, 19). This was a prophecy of Christ's coming. In the same way the patriarch Jacob spoke of Him while he was dying, saying, "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" (Genesis 49:10).

Moses also spoke of the One who would come. Speaking for God he declared, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me f r o m among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (Deuteronomy 18:15). And again, with God speaking, "I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him" (verse 18).

We turn to the Psalms and find there great prophecies. The second Psalm tells of Christ's eventual victory and rule over the nations of the earth. This Psalm was a popular one with the early Christians who used it in reference to Christ, as is apparent from Acts 4. Psalm 16 foretells the resurrection (verse 10; cf. Acts 2:31). In the twenty-second, twenty-third, and twenty-fourth Psalms we have three portraits of the Lord Jesus: the suffering Savior, the compassionate Shepherd and the King. Other Psalms speak of other aspects of His life and ministry. At last Psalm 110 returns to the theme of His rule, looking for the day when Jesus shall take His seat at the right hand of the Father when all His enemies shall be made His footstool (Psalm 110:1).

In addition, there are dozens of specific prophecies concerning the details of Christ's life, death, and resurrection that occur in the book of the prophets—in Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea,

Zechariah, and others. Jesus deliberately submitted His life to the outline revealed in such prophecies, and He fulfilled them specifically. That He did do this is evidenced by His rebuke to Peter after Peter had tried to prevent His arrest in Gethsemane. Jesus said, "Put your sword back in its place. . . Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how, then, would the Scriptures be fulfilled, that say it must happen in this way" (Matthew 26:52-54). And He went on to His crucifixion.

But rather than drawing up a detailed list of the Old Testament prophecies that have been fulfilled, I would like to leave you with just one picture. After His resurrection the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to two of His disciples, a man and his wife, who were on their way home from Jerusalem following the Passover at which He had been killed. The disciples were Cleopas and Mary. They were dejected. Mary had seen the crucifixion, and when Jesus had died her faith in Him and her hope had died also. Neither of them had any understanding that Christ needed to die and rise. Thus, even when reports of the empty tomb reached them early on that first Easter morning neither of them was able to take it in.

As they went on their way Jesus appeared to them, but He had changed Himself so that they could not recognize Him. He could have revealed Himself to them at once. Instead He revealed the purpose of the Scriptures and so taught both this couple and ourselves a great lesson.

The Bible says that he "opened" the Scriptures to them. The opening itself takes place in the midst of the story, but the phrase does not occur until the end. In reporting their encounter with Jesus they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us, while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). As we read on in the story, however, we soon find that this initial "opening," the opening of the Scriptures, is followed by another "opening." This is the opening of their eyes. We read that as a consequence of His teaching and as He sat with them and broke bread in their home, "Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Luke 24:31). Finally, at the end of the story we read that Jesus again appeared to them in the presence of all of the

other disciples and "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

Here are three great openings—the opening of the Scriptures, the opening of the eyes, and the opening of the mind. All three need to be reproduced in the life of every growing Christian. To have the Scriptures opened in the right way is to open the eyes to Christ. And this in turn opens our eyes in a new way to the Scriptures.

Has much of the Word of God been a mystery to you? Have you failed to see its purpose? If this has been the case, try reading the Bible to find Christ. Find Him as the seed of the woman and of Abraham. Discover Him prefigured in the life of Joseph. Recognize Him as the Passover lamb. See Him as the rock in the wilderness. Learn about Him as the cloud who guides His people in the years of their wandering. Perceive that He is the Righteous One of Deuteronomy. Carry through the pages of the Old Testament to Malachi where He is portrayed as the Son of Righteousness risen with healing in His wings. If this happens for you, the Bible will cease to be a book to be handled only and instead will become a tool to be looked through. It will become a telescope which will bring you close to the Lord Jesus.

# 2

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## THE PERVERSION OF BIBLE STUDY

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In the controversy which the Lord Jesus Christ had with the Jewish leaders of His day concerning the Scriptures, there was at least one point of agreement and two points of disagreement. The point on which both Jesus and the Jewish rulers agreed was that the Scriptures had divine origin. Many would disagree today, of course. But in Christ's day all recognized that the Scriptures of the Old Testament came from God. The points on which they disagree were these: first, the purpose of the Scriptures and, secondly, the use of the Scriptures. In the last chapter we discussed the purpose of the Scriptures. Now we want to consider how the Old and New Testaments can be misused.

Jesus spoke of this misuse when He said,

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no

effort to attain the praise that comes from the only God?" (John 5:39-42, 44).

We must begin by asking the questions:

- How did the Jews misuse the Scriptures?
- And can we misuse them in the same way?

The first answer, according to these words of Jesus is, quite obviously, that the Jews misused Scripture by treating the word of Scripture as an end in themselves rather than allowing them to do their primary work, which is to point the reader to Jesus. They searched the Scriptures, but they did not come to Christ. We err along the same lines whenever we allow Bible study to become academic and, as a result, do not allow ourselves to be drawn closer to God because of it.

No one could really fault the Jews of Christ's day for their meticulous study of the Scriptures. This was an acknowledged fact. The Jews did study the Scriptures. For this reason, I believe that verse 39 must be translated using the indicative case ("You. . . study the Scriptures") as many modern translations do, rather than using the imperative ("Search the Scriptures") as the Authorized Version does. The Jews prized the Scriptures. The difficulty did not lie there. The difficulty lay in the fact that in their high regard for the Bible, they quite easily passed over its intention. As a result, although they gained honor from men for their detailed knowledge of the Bible, they did not gain salvation.

We find a great example of this just a few chapters further on in John's Gospel. In chapter 9 John tells the story of the healing of a man who had been born blind. He was physically blind, of course; but the meat of the story lies in the fact that, like all men, he also was spiritually blind before Christ touched him. Afterwards he came to spiritual sight. The man born blind began with the confession that so far as he knew, he was healed only by a "man" named Jesus. He ended with the confession that Jesus is the "Lord" and worshiped Him.

When the man was healed, he came into conflict with the Jewish rulers. They knew of Jesus, but they did not believe in Him. In fact, they did not believe in Him precisely because of their attitude toward the Scriptures. For them the revelation recorded in the Old Testament was an end in itself. Nothing could be added. Nothing more, in fact, could be desired. They say, "We know that God spoke to Moses; but as for this fellow, we do not even know where he comes from (John 9:29). The man who had been born blind does not try to compete with them in their acknowledged mastery of the Old Testament, but he points to the unquestioned fact of his healing. He concludes, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (John 9:33). In treating the Old Testament as an end in itself, the Jews, therefore, actually perverted it and missed its true meaning. They failed to see that it is precisely to Jesus that the Old Testament law, which came through Moses, testifies.

Let me bring this down to a very practical level to our own day. Does anyone pervert the Bible by considering it an end in itself in our day? I believe that this happens frequently. Let me give some examples.

First it happens in the world of biblical scholarship. Take the "historical Jesus" movement, which dates from 1768, the year in which the noted German scholar Herman Samuel Reimarus died. Reimarus was not really a New Testament scholar. But at his death he left behind a manuscript that had far-reaching implications for those in the New Testament field. Reimarus argued that historians must distinguish between the "aim" of Jesus and the "aim" of His disciples. By this he meant that scholars should distinguish between the historical Jesus, who actually lived, and the Jesus of the New Testament, who was largely a product either of the faith or imagination of His followers. Faced with this choice, which he regarded as a choice between mutually exclusive alternatives, Reimarus chose the Jesus of history stripped of all supernatural elements. In his reconstruction Jesus then became one who went about preaching the kingdom of God, but who died forsaken by God and disillusioned. Reimarus thought that Christianity was the product of the disciples who stole the corpse, proclaimed a bodily



resurrection, and gathered followers.

It was obvious to many that Reimarus' views were extreme and his work polemical. Nevertheless, it turned out that his manuscript set the pattern for a whole century of historical-Jesus research. Scholars began to react against the supernatural element in the Gospels and cast about for a natural, alternative Jesus. Unfortunately, each only succeeded in producing a Jesus in his own image. Rationalists saw Him as the Great Teacher of morality. Socialists viewed Him as a friend of the poor and a revolutionary. David Friedrich Strauss rejected most of the Gospel as mythology, and Bruno Bauer ended his quest by denying that there ever was a historical Jesus. Bauer explained all the stories about Jesus as the products of the imagination of the primitive Christian community.

One can hardly fail to be impressed even today at the immense energy and talent that German scholars poured into this so-called "quest" for the historical Jesus, but the results were meager and the conclusions wrong. Scholarship had made the Gospels an end in themselves, so that the Bible became a book to be weighed and manipulated rather than believed and obeyed. What was the result? The result was that the Jesus produced was neither the historical Jesus nor the Christ of Scripture. Christ was the casualty. Here, then, was the error of Judaism repeated on Western soil and in recent history.

Let me give you another example. Isn't it true that the same thing happens in another way when a person buys a beautiful Bible to place in an important position in his or her home but doesn't read it? Why do people do this? The answer is that in their minds the Bible is something special. They have a superstitious reverence for it, but their belief does not go beyond superstition. As a result, they never read it and therefore, never come into contact with its Author.

Third, it seems to me that in the evangelical world we are often in danger of doing almost the same thing with translations. You know what I mean. I am for the use of any translation that actually helps the user get into the Scriptures and obey them. I recommend the use of contemporary versions of the Bible

alongside more standard texts such as that of the Authorized, the Revised Standard, and the New American Standard versions of the Bible. But alongside this very legitimate use of translations, there is also unfortunately an unhealthy preoccupation with the "best" and "latest" or most "contemporary" translation which I am convinced is harmful. For those who get their minds fixed on the translations, it is the small variation between different texts that proves most interesting, rather than the teaching. And obedience to Christ and a desire to know Him better evaporates.

So the first error that the Jews of Christ's day made, then, was the error of regarding the Scriptures as an end in themselves. But this was not their only error. There was a second error also which was that of becoming so preoccupied with the details of Scripture that they missed the truths contained there. For instance, the scribes, whose work it was to copy the Scriptures, subjected the pages of the Bible to the closet scrutiny. They gave attention to every syllable. They even counted up the word and letters so that they knew which of them came in the middle of the page and how many of each a given page should have. We can be thankful for this great care in one sense, of course, for the accuracy of our present Old Testament texts is the result of it. Nevertheless, in the case of most scribes, the reaction of the copier with the Word of God stopped with the copying. The words were accurate, but what is the value of accurate words without meanings? Or what is the value of letters if these are not inscribed on the fleshly tablets of the heart?

We have a contemporary example of this error in those who have a high degree of biblical knowledge—those who can name all of the twelve apostles, the cities Paul visited, the list of the Hebrew kings, and so on—but who have missed what the Scriptures have to teach about sin, justification, the Christian life, and obedience. Many others make this precise mistake in a preoccupation with prophecy.

Finally, the Jews also erred in considering the Scriptures rather than God as the source of life. This is easy to document. One Jewish writing, the Siphre on Deuteronomy 32:2 says, "As rain is life for the world, so also are the words of Torah life for the

world." 1 Baruch 4:1-2 says, "This is the book of the commandments of God and the Law that endureth for ever. All they that hold it fast are appointed to life; but such as leave it shall die." Hillel's words to the same effect are proverbial: "More flesh more worms; more wealth more care; more maidservants more lewdness; more menservants more thieving; more women more witchcraft; more Torah more life. . . Who so has gained a good name has gained it for himself; who has gained for himself words of Torah has gained for himself the life in the world to come" (Pirke Aboth 2:8). Quite clearly, all of this was literally believed. The important thing was the memorization of Scripture; this in itself won salvation. Against this view Jesus wished to point out that formal study of the Bible was not a guarantee of the life to come, as the rabbis believed. Christ is the life, not the Scriptures, considered in themselves. Only Christ can guarantee salvation.

What is needed then? The answer is that men and women need the new birth found in a new relationship to Jesus. The important story here is the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus recorded earlier in the Gospel. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was a representative figure of the Jews. In this context a Jewish reader would expect a rabbinical debate, a discussion of the specific promises concerning a messiah, or something similar. Instead, the situation is no sooner introduced than Jesus moves the discussion to a higher and more spiritual plane. Jesus answers Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3).

We may summarize this by saying that the Bible was given by God to point a man to the Savior and that he must come to the Savior if he is to find life. This is necessary, for unless the life of God takes possession of our hearts, even the Word of God will be incomprehensible.

Has the Word of God done that for you? Has it pointed you to the Savior? Let me give you one last story. Some time ago, in preparing a Christmas message, I became impressed with the large number of men who missed Christmas even though there was no real need for them to have missed it. The inn-keeper was one. He was too busy. Herod was another. But by far the most interesting

of all those who missed the birth of Jesus were the religious leaders, the chief priests and the scribes, who missed it even though they had the Old Testament and knew where Christ should be born. You remember the story. The wise men had come to Jerusalem [and asked Herod where the king of the Jews would be born]. Herod inquired of the scribes. They said that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem. It was on their word that the wise men started out to Bethlehem, where they found him. These men had the Scriptures. They knew them well enough to have the right answers. But they did not leave their own homes or the palace to investigate the Savior's arrival.

On the other hand, the Christmas story also tells us of some who did find Christmas. They were not the kings of this world. They were not the religious leaders. They were not the thousands who were entirely engrossed in the countless minutia of materialistic lives. They were just poor folk who were looking to God and to whom God came.

Who were they? Some were shepherds. They were not important in the social structure of the ancient East. And yet they saw the angels. The wise men also found Christmas. They were not even Jews, and yet they saw the star. Finally, there were the poor but saintly folk like Simeon and Anna. These could well have been discounted either because of their means or social position or age. Some men would dismiss them. And yet they saw and even held God's treasure. Why did these people find Jesus when the important of the world, as the world judges importance, so clearly missed Him? There are two answers. First, they were honest enough to admit their need of a Savior. And second, they were humble enough to receive Him personally when He came.

The Bible calls for this honest confession of sin and this humble commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. You can read the Bible as the leaders of Israel did. You can misuse it out of pride. Or you can use it properly and come yourself to the Savior. Will you come?

# 3

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## UNDERSTANDING GOD'S BOOK

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A popular English and New Zealand preacher by the name of Frank W. Boreham published five books on verses from the Word of God, relating each verse to a well-known figure from church history, politics, or literature. The best-known of these books had the subtitle: "Texts That Made History."

I have never felt at ease claiming one verse more than another as my particular text. But if I do have a life text, it is one I was given by the pastor of the church in which I grew up: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

It is the last phrase that particularly interests me. Whether providentially given or not, I do not know, but 2 Timothy 2:15 has characterized much of what I have done in my academic and Christian life. During my grade school and high school years I received the basic instruction that any young man growing up in an evangelical church might be expected to have. In college I was no longer receiving formal biblical instruction (at least not in Sunday school), but I supplemented my earlier knowledge by

Christian reading. In seminary I delved into biblical languages, theology and church history. I was able to further this study during three years of intensive graduate work in Switzerland. Since that time I have been engaged in systematic study and exposition of the Word of God as part of my responsibilities as pastor of Philadelphia's historic Tenth Presbyterian Church. Yet I must say that in spite of what has now become thirty or forty years of Bible study, I recognize more acutely than ever the danger of handling the Word of God incorrectly.

It is significant, of course, that Paul's encouragement to handle Scripture properly was written to Timothy, the Apostle's young companion, to whom he was committing general oversight of large portions of the early Christian church. Timothy was no novice. He had known the Holy Scriptures "from infancy" (2 Timothy 3:15), had the Apostle Paul as his teacher (2 Timothy 1:13), and had been given a special gift of ministry "through the laying on of . . . hands" (2 Timothy 1:6). Yet it is precisely to this man that the Apostle Paul says, "Present yourself to God as . . . a workman who . . . correctly handles the word of truth."

Someone might say, "Well, if even Timothy had to give special attention not to treat the Bible incorrectly, effective and accurate study of the Word of God is probably beyond someone like me. Effective Bible study cannot be done by normal persons." Such a reaction is precisely the opposite of what the Apostle Paul intended. After the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Church took this position in the decrees of the Council of Trent:

In order to restrain petulant spirits, it [the Council] decrees that no one, relying on his own skill, shall—in matters of faith and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine—wresting the sacred Scriptures to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church—whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures—hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were

never [intended] to be at any time published.

This statement says that only experts—in this case, the fathers of the church—have the right to interpret Scripture properly. But to this statement the Reformers correctly replied that God has given every Christian the right and power to interpret Scripture for himself. The reformers did not ignore the danger of distorting Scripture, the matter about which the bishops of Trent were concerned. But they replied that the proper way of dealing with this problem is not by entrusting the interpretation of Scripture to some elite body of Christian scholars or theologians, but rather by all Christians applying proper principles of interpretation to the task of Bible study.

In other words, as the Apostle Paul himself also recognized in writing to Timothy, the “experts” no less than the “common” Christian may misinterpret. All must give care to handle God’s Word properly. The principles for handling the Bible correctly are for everyone.

## DESTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

Before we develop some proper guidelines for interpreting the Bible, it is worth looking at some of the erroneous systems of Bible interpretation that have sprung up in recent decades. This preliminary review is valuable for two reasons. First, a look at erroneous systems highlights a proper approach by contrast. Second, since most Christians do not have technical training in the history of biblical interpretation, they should be warned against misleading systems, which are, chiefly, the destructive higher criticism, both in its Old Testament and New Testament forms, and the subjective hermeneutic which recently has gained great popularity.

Destructive higher criticism began with attacks on the Old Testament and can be dated in its modern form to the middle of the eighteenth century. It is usually associated with the name of Jean Astruc, a scientist and physician who served in the French court. He called attention to a fact that Bible scholars had long



noted, namely, that in Genesis God is designated by two different names: Elohim and Jehovah. These are sometimes intermingled freely. But there are blocks of Genesis in which only one or the other name is used. Calling attention to this, Astruc proposed that Genesis was composed of two or three separate documents, the authors of which had different names for (and even different conceptions of) God.

Astruc's proposal was not as radical as the critical method he used was to become. Already, however, it had within it those elements that were to be developed fully in succeeding centuries. First, it broke with the traditional views of authorship according to which Moses had always been regarded as the author of Genesis. Second, it shifted attention from the meaning of the text to the supposed sources lying behind the text and to the process by which these various sources assumed their present form. Third, it introduced a new procedure. It focused on the style, vocabulary, syntax, and other features of Genesis as the sole basis upon which its authenticity and integrity could be evaluated.

At first Astruc's work received little notice. Yet within a few years it was picked up by mostly German scholars and was expanded to include the whole of the Old Testament. Johann Eichhorn applied Astruc's approach to the entire Pentateuch. Wilhelm DeWette and Edouard Reuss attempted to bring the results into line with Jewish history, with Reuss concluding that in the correct historical sequence the prophets are earlier than the Law, and the Psalms later than both. The most popular and, in some sense, the culminating work in this field was the *Prolegomena* of Julius Wellhausen published in 1878. This work widely disseminated the four-stage documentary hypothesis known as JEPD ("J" for the Jehovah source, "W" for the Elohim source, "P" for the priestly documents and code, and "D" for the later editorial work of the Deuteronomist or Deuteronomic school). It dated the writing of the Law after the Babylonian exile and placed the Book of the Covenant and the most ancient editing of the "J" and "E" narratives prior to the eighth century B.C.

In New Testament studies the energies of the higher critics were directed in a slightly different direction: to recover the Jesus

of history through a study of the origins of the Gospel narratives, and the development of New Testament theology as preserved in the Epistles of Paul, the pastorals, the Johannine literature, and Revelation. But the same principles were involved. In fact, they have been carried forward in an even more radical way in New Testament studies than in the nineteenth-century investigation of the Pentateuch.

The origin of higher critical principles in New Testament study is usually traced to Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), who organized the material along historical lines. Hegel had developed the view that history proceeds by thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Baur applied this to biblical history also, citing the supposed conflict of Petrine and Pauline theology as evidence of a doctrinal thesis and antithesis within the early church. This led to the synthesis of early Catholicism in Baur's thinking. Although Baur's thesis is rejected today, he succeeded in shaking the traditional views concerning the authorship and composition of the New Testament books—another “liberation”—and called the attention of the scholarly world to a rediscovery of the historical Christ as the primary New Testament problem.

In recent years, higher criticism of the New Testament has centered around the work of Rudolf Bultmann, a former professor at the University of Marburg, Germany. Much of Bultmann's energy was expended on stripping away what he felt to be the “mythology” of the New Testament writers—heaven, hell, and miracles. According to Bultmann, what lies beneath the mythology is the church's deepest understanding of life created by its experience with the risen Lord. Consequently, nothing may be known of Jesus in terms of pure history except the mere fact that He existed. Bultmann said that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus.

There are certain characteristics that tie higher criticism together. First, there is humanism. In most forms of the modern debate, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are handled as if they are man's word about God, rather than God's word to man. Within this framework the Bible is only a record of human reflection and action in the field of religion, and the

interpreter's task becomes the work of sifting that experience and evaluating it for possible use in our age.

The second common characteristic of higher criticism is naturalism, expressed in the belief that the Bible is the result of an evolutionary process. This has been very evident in Old Testament studies in the way the documentary theory of the Pentateuch has developed. But it is also evident in Bultmann's form of criticism, for everything depends upon the early church gradually developing its understanding of reality and preserving this at various stages through the written traditions. In this view, early and primitive understandings of God and reality gave way to later, more developed conceptions, from which it also follows that the so-called "primitive" ideas may be rejected in favor of more modern ones. Miracles may be discounted. Crude notions such as the wrath of God, sacrifice, a visible second coming of the Lord, and other items may be excluded from the religion of the New Testament.

The third major characteristic of the higher criticism is based upon the first two. It is the view that if truth changes, as the evolutionary hypothesis holds, then it continues to change; it has changed since the last books of the Bible were written; and, consequently, we must go beyond the Scriptures to understand true religion.

## A SUBJECTIVE HERMENEUTIC

The second erroneous approach to biblical interpretation is subjectivism. This approach does not have a long academic history, as does destructive higher criticism. In fact, that is its major problem. Subjectivism has no history at all. It is merely the idea—not at all founded on fact or analysis—that Scripture can mean anything, depending upon the thoughts and needs of him who reads it. We see this view in statements like: "Well, that's just your opinion," "A person can prove anything from Scripture" or "It doesn't matter what you believe so long as reading the Bible, hearing sermons, or going to church helps you cope with life."

Unfortunately this view often unaccountably carries over into

the scholarly world, where men and women should at least know better. The task of the scholar is to study documents to see what they really mean and to study important historical periods to learn what really happened and was believed in those periods. But today many seem to think that an objective analysis and single answers are unnecessary. In other words, there is no objective meaning to Scripture. The only value of the Bible is in what we are able to make it mean for us subjectively, and this may be something for one person and an entirely different something for someone else.

In a system like this, there is no such thing as genuine revelation. There is no sure word from God. Everybody simply believes what he or she wants to believe, and any valid basis for faith or ethics vanishes. Indeed, even the task of interpretation vanishes, for there is no need or even possibility of handling the word of truth "correctly."

## UNITY AND NON-CONTRADICTION

Obviously, we need a proper procedure for interpreting the Bible. We need sound principles. But what are these principles to be? The Bible has come to us over a period of approximately fifteen hundred years by about forty human authors. Yet it claims to be from God. This makes it quite unlike any other book that has ever been written and suggests that the principles of interpreting it must be different. But are they? Should they be? What should the proper principles for interpreting this book be?

Each of the principles suggested here grows out of the nature of the Bible itself, and the first one grows out of the Bible's being the Word of God. True, the Bible has come through human authors, and that involves other principles that also need to be considered in due time. But first and most important is the truth that the Bible has one author who is God.

This leads to two principles of interpretation: first, the principle of unity, and second, the principle of non-contradiction. Taken together they mean that, if the Bible is truly from God, and if God is a God of truth (as He is), then the parts of the book must go together to tell one story. If the parts of the book seem to

be in opposition or in contradiction to each other, then our interpretation of one or both of these parts is in error. If a scholar is expending his efforts to highlight contradictions in the biblical text and is not going beyond that to indicate how they may possibly be resolved, he is not demonstrating his wisdom or honesty so much as he is demonstrating his failure as an interpreter of the Word of God.

Many will claim that trying to find unity where there is none is dishonesty. But this is not the case. To say there is no unity is rather a matter of interpretation and presuppositions.

We may take the matter of sacrifices as an example. Everyone recognizes that sacrifices play a large role in the Old Testament and that they are not so important in the New Testament. Why is this? Here one person brings in his idea of an evolving religious conscience. He supposes that sacrifices are important in the most primitive forms of religion. They are to be explained by the individual's fear of the god or God. God is imagined to be a capricious, vengeful deity. So worshipers try to appease him by sacrifice. This seems to be the general idea of sacrifice in the other pagan religions of antiquity. It is assumed for the religion of the ancient Semite peoples too.

In time, however, this view of God is imagined to give way to a more elevated conception of Him. When this happens, God is seen to be not so much a God of capricious whim and wrath, but rather a God of justice. So law begins to take a more prominent place, eventually replacing sacrifice as the center of the religion. Finally, the worshipers rise to the conception of God as a God of love, and at this point sacrifice disappears entirely. Today this interpreter would regard both sacrifices and the wrath of God as outmoded concepts.

By contrast, another person, perhaps an evangelical, would approach the material with entirely different presuppositions and would therefore produce an entirely different interpretation. He would begin by noting that the Old Testament does indeed tell a great deal about the wrath of God. But he would add that this element is hardly eliminated as one goes on through the Bible, most certainly not from the New Testament. It is, for instance, an

important theme of Paul. Or again, it emerges strongly in the Book of Revelation, where we read of God's just wrath eventually being poured out against the sins of a rebellious and ungodly race.

Nor is this all, for the idea of sacrifice is also present throughout the Scriptures. It is true that the detailed sacrifices of the Old Testament system are no longer performed in the New Testament churches. But this is not because a supposed primitive conception of God has given way to a more advanced one but rather because the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ has completed and superseded them all, as the Book of Hebrews clearly maintains.

For this person the solution is not to be found in an evolving conception of God, for God is always the same—a God of wrath toward sin, a God of love toward the sinner. Rather it is to be found in God's progressive revelation of Himself to man, a revelation in which the sacrifices (for which God gives explicit instructions) are intended to teach both the dreadfully serious nature of sin and the way in which God had always determined to save sinners.

The sacrifices point to Christ. Therefore, John the Baptist was able to say, referring to a phrase of Jewish life that all would understand, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) . And Peter could write, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18-19) .

The data are the same. The only difference is that one scholar approaches the Scripture looking for contradiction and development, while the other approaches it as if God has written it and therefore looks for unity, allowing one passage of Scripture to throw light on another.

## THE ANALOGY OF FAITH

In saying that one passage throws light on another, we come to a third principle of interpretation which grows out of the truth

that God is the Bible's author. The third principle is what the Protestant Reformers call "the analogy of faith," meaning that Scripture interprets itself (*Scriptura sui interpres*). The Westminster divines said:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and know by other places that speak more clearly.

More recently, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy's Conference on Hermeneutics, meeting in Chicago in the fall of 1982, declared:

We affirm the unity, harmony, and consistency of Scripture and declare that it is its own best interpreter. We deny that Scripture may be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that one passage corrects or militates against another. We deny that later writers of Scripture misinterpreted earlier passages of Scripture when quoting from or referring to them (Article 17).

In simplest form, this means that if a passage of Scripture can be interpreted in two ways, one of which is in harmony with other passages of Scripture and one of which is not, we should choose the interpretation that is in harmony with other texts. This is not dishonest, as some would claim. It is only reasonable, the kind of thing we would readily do even with another human author, not to mention God. If a writer says something in one place that could be interpreted as contradicting what he says in another place, it is only common courtesy to seek an explanation that makes the passages consistent. Of course, when dealing with human authors it is possible to find passages that do contradict each other, since human beings are limited in their viewpoints and often err either in the views themselves or in their expressions of them. But this does not hold true for God. If God is the Author of the Bible, it is



the most reasonable thing in the world to expect His various statements to complement and reinforce each other. If not, God speaks with a forked tongue, which is unworthy of Him.

I do not mean by this that all portions of Scripture are therefore always easily understood. Parts of the Bible will always seem difficult to us. However, the difficulties reveal the weakness of our own understanding rather than flaws in God's revelation.

## STUDY THE CONTENT

The second great truth about the Bible is that it has been given to us through human channels, even though God is the ultimate source of the Scriptures. This does not mean, as we have seen, that the Bible is therefore subject to error as all merely human books are. But it does mean that all sound principles of interpretation must be used in studying the Bible, precisely as they would be used in the study of any other document. The way into the mind of God is through the mind of the human author, whom He used as a channel. Consequently, the only proper way to interpret the Bible is to discover what these human spokesmen were concerned to express.

One necessary part of doing this—a fourth principle—is to consider each biblical statement in context, in this case within the context of the chapter, book, and eventually, the entire Word of God. This is an obvious need, since any statement taken out of context can be misleading. But it is something particularly to be guarded against in the interpretation of the Bible, since Bible-believing people have such high regard for the very words of Scripture that they sometimes elevate them as oracles, at the expense of their contexts.

Some people read the Bible at random, dipping here or there. This may be characteristic of the way they do most things in life, but it is a mistake in Bible study. It inevitably leads to a lack of proportion and depth which is often characteristic of Christians today. A far better system is a regular, disciplined study of key books. New Christians could begin with one of the Gospels, perhaps the Gospel of John or Mark. After this they could go on

to Acts, Ephesians, Galatians, Romans, or an Old Testament book such as Genesis. It is always valuable to read and meditate on the Psalms.

Certain procedures should be followed during each study. First, the book itself should be read through carefully as many as four or five times, perhaps aloud one of these times. Each time something new will strike the reader.

Second, the book should be divided into its chief sections, just as we divide modern books into chapters (not necessarily the same chapters as in our Bibles), subsections, and paragraphs. At this stage the object should be to see which verses belong together, what subjects are covered, and what the sequence of subjects is.

Third, these sections should be related to one another: Which are the main sections or subjects? Which are introductory? Which are applications? At this stage one should be developing an outline of the book and should be able to answer such questions as: What does this book say? To whom was it written? Why was it written? If you are studying Romans, for example, you should be able to say, "This book was written to the church at Rome, but also to churches in all places and at all times. It says that the human race is lost in sin and that the answer to that sin is the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Its purpose is to explain this gospel. A minor purpose was to alert the Romans to Paul's desire to visit them on his way to a future ministry in Spain."

The student can now proceed to a more detailed study of individual sections. What is the main subject of each section? What is said about it? Why is it said? What are the conclusions that follow from it?

Alongside serious, in-depth study of one book or section of the Bible, there should also be an attempt to become acquainted with the whole Bible. This means reading it comprehensively.

Naturally, many parts of the Bible will not appeal to us at first. But if we never make an attempt to become acquainted with them, we limit our growth and may even warp our understanding. Paul told Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16, my emphasis).

## CONSIDER THE STYLE

A fifth principle is to consider the style of the material and then to interpret it within that framework. On a large scale, this is obviously a need when dealing with poetical literature such as Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and even parts of the prophetic material. Poetic books frequently employ symbols or images; they are misinterpreted if these are taken literally. The Book of Revelation is not to be taken literally in all its parts, as for example, the vision of Jesus found in the opening verses. If it were, the result is a monstrosity, a figure entirely white, having hair like wool, eyes like fire, feet like heated and glowing bronze, a sword going out of His mouth, and with seven stars in His right hand. When each of these items is discovered to be an image associated with God in the Old Testament, then the vision yields a portrait of Jesus, shown to be one with God the Father in all His attributes. He is the holy, eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, revealing, and sovereign God.

Style also has its bearing upon the Lord's use of parables, a special method of teaching which must be recognized as such. Usually a parable makes one or, at best, a few main points. Consequently, it is an error to fix an application to each detail of the story. To give an example, an attempt to assign a meaning to the husks, pigs, and other details of the story of the prodigal son is merely ludicrous.

## HISTORICAL VERSUS DIDACTIC MATERIAL

A sixth principle of interpretation is to interpret historical material by didactic material. Historical material is narration, accounts of what happened in the past. Didactic material is teaching material. It is important to have the didactic material interpret the historical material rather than the other way around, because things that happened in history are sometimes right and sometimes wrong, sometimes normative and sometimes extraordinary. If we use historical material to try to determine what we should believe and do now, we are often misled.

For example, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was an extraordinary event, prophesied in the Old Testament. Peter, speaking of that occasion, called attention to its being a fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32 (see Acts 2:14-26). At Pentecost there was a sound like the blowing of a violent wind. The disciples saw tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. They were able to speak in other languages by the power of the Holy Spirit. On the basis of this account, some people have argued that the same three effects, the wind, fire, and tongues, should be present whenever any person is "filled" or "baptized" by the Holy Spirit, or should at least be able to speak in tongues! But surely this is a misuse of historical narration. It may be the case that some who receive the Holy Spirit may speak in tongues, but the fact that this happened on one occasion and may happen on other occasions does not mean that it is normative or even desirable for all Christians. Indeed, even in the Book of Acts this does not seem to have been the universal experience of believers. A doctrine of the Holy Spirit ought to be drawn from the teaching passages of the Bible. The discourses in the latter half of John's Gospel are examples of such passages. So is Galatians 5:22-23, which describes the fruit of the Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." These passages are normative. The others are only records of past happenings.

## WHY WAS IT WRITTEN?

A seventh principle is to consider the purpose for which a particular passage was written. Most passages deal with spiritual things, primarily what it means to be and to live as a child of God. Very seldom (perhaps never) is a passage written to give modern scientific explanations of the universe.

One obvious application of this principle is to those references which seem to have bothered Rudolf Bultmann so much, in which heaven is assumed to be "up there" and hell "below" our feet. Again, it applies to passages that say that bones cry out, bowels yearn, kidneys instruct, and ears judge. It is often

said that these references reveal a mistaken notion of the universe and the human constitution, but this is absurd. All these passages show is that the biblical writers wrote in the idiom of their day so that they would be understood. Their use of such phrases was no more mistaken than our use of phrases like "walking on air," a "gut feeling," "deep in my heart," and so on.

Care must be taken because it is not always easy to determine whether a passage is using literal or figurative language, of course. Most important, however, is to be aware of the problem and to seek consciously for the true scope of the passage.

## THE MEANING OF WORDS

Another need that follows upon the Bible's being a human book as well as a divine book—an eighth principle—is to give attention to the meaning of words. Although it is possible that God can think without words, it is certain that we cannot. Thoughts cannot be expressed without words. Consequently, the meanings of words and an individual's use of them are of great importance. In studying words, we must be aware that their meanings sometimes change over a period of time, even within the scope of the Bible itself. One is often helped in this type of study by such works as Gerhard Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, or by other dictionaries and study aids.

Suppose you are studying Romans 3:21-26 and want to learn more about the important word "righteousness," with which the section begins. One key verse is Romans 10:3, in which the righteousness of God is distinguished from our righteousness. Also, Romans 1:17 says that the righteousness of God is made known in the gospel. In all, righteousness is used thirty-five times in this one letter alone, and most of these uses throw light on one another. At this point you may also observe the use of the word in other books of the Bible, perhaps using the chain reference system which some Bibles provide. Some dictionaries contain the derivation of words, which throw light on their meanings.

We must be aware of the fact that the meanings of English words also change. So when we are using an older version of the

Bible, such as the Authorized or King James Version, we should remember that the words have sometimes shifted meanings. For example, the King James Version of 1 Thessalonians 4:15 says, "We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." According to modern English usage, the word "prevent" suggests that those who are alive at Christ's return will not be able to stop those who have died from also rising to be with Him. But that is not the meaning. At the time of the King James translation "prevent" meant "precede" or "come before" (from the Latin *prae venire*). The text really means that the dead in Christ shall rise first and that the living shall then accompany them into Christ's presence.

The summary of these points is contained in what has come to be called the historical-literal or grammatical-literal method of biblical interpretation. This simply means that the intended sense of the writer is to be taken as fundamental. The intended meaning of the words in their own context and in the speech of the original writer or spokesman is the starting point.

In other words, Scripture statements must be interpreted in the light of the rules of grammar and discourse on the one hand, and of their own place in history on the other. This is what we should expect in the nature of the case, seeing that the biblical books originated as occasional documents addressed to contemporary audiences.

This principle is based on the fact that the Bible is God's Word in man's language. It means that Scripture is to be interpreted in its natural sense; and that theological or cultural preferences must not be allowed to obscure this fundamental meanings.

## OBEDIENT GOD'S WORD

The Bible has been given by God to provoke a personal response in us. So, if we do not respond to it, we inevitably misuse the Bible (even in studying it) and misinterpret it. We have an example of this principle from Christ's day. Jesus said to the Jewish leaders, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you

think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me; yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. . . . How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?" (John 5:39-42, 44).

No one could fault the Jews of Christ's day for having a low opinion of the Scriptures. They actually had the highest regard for them. Nor could they be faulted for a lack of meticulous study. The Jews did study the Scriptures. It is an acknowledged fact that they prized them. The difficulty lay in the fact that in their high regard for Scripture they quite easily passed over its intention. Their lives were not changed. Although they gained honor from men for their detailed knowledge of the Scriptures, they did not gain salvation.

We find another example of this further on in John's Gospel. In chapter 9 John told the story of the healing of a man who had been born blind. He was physically blind, of course. But the meat of the story lies in the fact that, like all men, he was also spiritually blind before Christ touched him. Afterward he came to spiritual sight.

When the man was healed he came into conflict with the Jewish rulers. They knew of Jesus, but they did not believe on Him. In fact, they did not believe precisely because of their attitude to the Scriptures. For them the revelation recoded in the Old Testament was an end in itself. Nothing could be added, and nothing was required. They said, "We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from" (John 5: 29). The man who had been born blind did not try to compete with them in their acknowledged mastery of the Old Testament, but he pointed to the fact of his healing. He concluded, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (John 5:33). In treating the Old Testament as an end in itself, the Jews, therefore, actually perverted it and missed its true meaning. They failed to see that it

is precisely to Jesus that the Old Testament law, which came through Moses, testified.

In its simplest form, this means that we must obey the Bible if we are to understand it in the fullest sense. This is a ninth principle of interpretation. We can understand the Bible superficially, enough to know what it is we are refusing to obey. But God hides the deep things of His Word from any who are unwilling to obey Him.

Jesus said that we will only know the truth about Himself if we are willing to do His will, that is, if we allow ourselves to be changed by the truths we find in Scripture. He said, "If anyone chooses to do God's will [that is, if he determines to do it], he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7:17). We must not assume that we will be able fully to understand any passage of Scripture unless we are willing to be changed by it.

## WAITING ON GOD

A final principle grows out of the internal witness of the Spirit to the truth of God's Word. Here Scripture speaks succinctly. The Holy Spirit was active not only in the writing of the biblical books. He is active also in conveying the truth of the Bible to the minds of those who read it. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Corinthians 2:12-13). Because the Bible deals with spiritual themes, it requires the activity of the Holy Spirit for us to understand them. The Holy Spirit is the teacher of Christians. Moreover, it is He who brings forth new life in those who hear the Gospel.

So the tenth principle is: we must pray as we study the Scriptures, asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten our hearts. The Spirit's presence is not given to make a careful and diligent study of the Word of God unnecessary but to make it effective. Prayer



solves the problem of studying the Bible for its own sake—discussed earlier in this chapter. By prayer we can avoid the mere formalism of the scribes. In true Bible study we first ask the Holy Spirit to open our minds to understand His truth and then obey it as He applies it to our lives.

The author of Psalm 119 indicated the proper attitude when he wrote, "Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word. Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (Psalm 119:17-18). What will a prayer like this accomplish? It makes us conscious that we are meeting God in our reading and not merely going through some prescribed religious ritual. After we pray we must say to ourselves, "God is now going to speak to me," and then we must read to hear what He will say. There is probably nothing that will make Bible study more exciting than this—to know that as we read, God is actually speaking to us personally and is teaching us. This makes Bible study and the prayer that accompanies it a time of personal communion with Him.

It is worth summarizing these ten principles of proper Bible interpretation:

1. The principle of unity. Since the Bible has one author, namely, God, the parts of the Bible must go together to form one overall story and present one consistent theology. If they do not seem to do this, we are misinterpreting.
2. The principle of non-contradiction. Since the Bible has one author, one part of the Bible will not oppose or contradict another.
3. The principle of the analogy of faith. The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. Less obscure passages will throw light on obscure ones.
4. The principle of context. Bible statements are not unrelated oracles; therefore, they are not to be torn from their context. They must be interpreted within the context of the chapter, book, and eventually, the entire Word of God.
5. The principle of style. The style of a passage must be taken into consideration. Poetry must be considered as poetry,

parables as parables, historical material as historical material, and so on.

6. The principle of didactic material interpreting historical material. Historical happenings are sometimes right and sometimes wrong, sometimes normal and sometimes abnormal. Teaching material shows how historical material is to be interpreted.
7. The principle of purpose. The chief end or purpose of a passage's being written should govern our interpretation. It cannot be used to teach what it was not written to teach.
8. The principle of the importance of words. Thoughts cannot be conveyed without words. Therefore, it is important to study words and know their exact (and sometimes changing) meanings.
9. The principle of obedience. The deep things of the Bible are hidden from those who refuse to obey its teachings.
10. The principle of prayer. It is easy to err in interpreting any document but this is especially so when we are dealing with one presenting spiritual matters. We must ask God to send His Holy Spirit to guide our understanding. The Holy Spirit is not given to make careful, disciplined study of the Word of God unnecessary but to make it effective.

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## THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE WORD OF GOD

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The most important thing that Tenth Presbyterian Church has stood for is the priority of the Bible as the Word of God. That priority has been both doctrinal and practical. It is doctrinal because we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice; and it is practical because we believe the Bible must be the treasure most valued and attended to in the church's life. This has been a factor from the very beginning—from the days of Thomas A. McAuley, the first pastor (1829-1833), and Henry Augustus Boardman, the first minister to serve a long pastorate (1833-1876). But it is best illustrated by an incident from the early days of the ministry of Donald Grey Barnhouse (1927-1960), who had a profound and personal influence on my own idea of what the ministry should be.

A week or two after Barnhouse became pastor of Tenth Church, he entered the pulpit one Sunday morning and opened the great pulpit Bible to a point near the middle, where he then placed his sermon notes, his Bible, and a hymn book. As he

looked down, he noticed that the words on the pages of the Bible were part of a curse upon those nations that do not know God. It occurred to him that he would like to have before him a passage containing words of a great promise.

He opened the Bible to Isaiah 55:10-11, which says:

As the rain and the snow  
    come down from heaven;  
and do not return to it  
    without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
    so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
so is my word that goes out from my mouth;  
It will not return to me empty,  
    but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

To his surprise he discovered that for decades his predecessors had apparently done the same thing. The edges of the Bible were worn in half circles curling inward from the bindings at that text, and the pages were torn and mended. As he later observed, those pages "containing the great fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah and the preceding pages with the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah concerning the Lord Jesus Christ as God's Lamb, give mute evidence that the men who have stood in the pulpit of Tenth Church for more than a century were men of the living Word and the written Word."

Later Barnhouse discovered that there was another section of the Bible that was similarly worn. It was the great psalm of the Bible, Psalm 119. Evidently, his predecessors, finding it difficult to keep their notes on the Isaiah pages, looked for another passage that would remind them of the power and priority of God's Word.

Barnhouse told this story in a memorial booklet marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of his pastorate at Tenth Church, concluding this way: "It is my prayer that no man shall ever stand in this pulpit as long as time shall last who does not desire to have all that he does based upon this Book. For this Book does not

contain the Word of God; it is the Word of God. And though we may preach the Word with all the stammering limitations of our human nature, the grace of God does the miracle of the ministry, and through lips speaks the divine Word, and the hearts of the people are refreshed. There is no other explanation for the continuing power of a church that is poorly located, that is without endowment, but which continues to draw men and women to the capacity of its seating arrangements, morning and evening, summer and winter, and which sends its sons and daughters by the score to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ through the world."

## INNERRANCY OF GOD'S WORD

About ten years into my pastorate, at the end of 1977 and the beginning of 1978, I helped start an organization that was also concerned with the priority of the Word of God but which focused its efforts on the important matter we perceived to be under attack at that time, namely the Bible's inerrancy. Our organization was called the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, and it had within it such outstanding evangelical leaders as Francis Schaeffer, J. I. Packer, A. Wetherell Johnson, R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Roger Nicole, and many others. It had as its purpose the task of "elucidating, vindicating and applying the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element for the authority of Scripture and a necessity for the health of the church of God."

In the 1970's the evangelical church was drifting from its roots, and professors in prominent evangelical institutions were teaching that the Bible contains errors of historical and scientific fact but that it does not matter that it does. We believed that it does matter and tackled this deviation head on.

We held three gatherings of prominent evangelical scholars to hammer out three documents of "affirmation and denial." They became nearly creedal in some quarters. The first was on inerrancy itself ("The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy"), the second on principles of interpretation ("The Chicago Statement on

Biblical Hermeneutics"), and the third on application ("The Chicago Statement on the Application of the Bible to Contemporary Issues"). We also held two large lay conferences, the first in San Diego in the spring of 1982 and the second in Washington in the fall of 1988.

In the early days we were often asked why inerrancy was important since "it should be enough merely to believe that the Bible is trustworthy in areas of faith and morals." But it is not that simple. To begin with, the Bible is a historical book and Christianity is a historical religion. So if the Bible errs in matters of historical fact, Christianity itself is affected. One hundred years of German "historical Jesus" research proved that. The scholars involved in this movement wanted to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, finding out who the true Jesus was. But as Albert Schweitzer proved in his classic study, *"The Quest of the Historical Jesus,"* all they succeeded in doing was making Jesus into the scholars' own images. Rationalists produced a rationalist Jesus, socialists a socialistic Jesus, moralists a moralistic Jesus, and so on. The attempt to have Christianity without its historical base was a failure.

Besides, if part of the Bible is true and part is not, who is to tell us what the true parts are? There are only two answers to that question. Either we must make the decision ourselves, in which case the truth becomes subjective—the thing that is true becomes merely what appeals to me—or else it is the scholar who tells us what we can believe and what we cannot believe. We argued that God has not left us either to our own whims or to the whims of scholars. He has given us a reliable book that we can read and understand ourselves.

The inerrancy of the Bible is what I wrestled with during my seminary years. It is not that I questioned it. Anyone who has been raised with the teaching of Donald Grey Barnhouse and others like him could hardly doubt that God has given us an inerrant revelation. My problem was that my teachers did not believe this, and much of what I was hearing in the classroom was meant to reveal the Bible's errors so students would not depend on it too deeply. What was a student to do? The professors seemed

to have all the facts. How were professors to be challenged when they argued that recent scholarship has shown that the old simplistic views about the Bible being inerrant are no longer valid and we have to admit that the Bible is filled with errors?

As I worked on this, I discovered some interesting things. First, the problems imagined to be in the Bible were hardly new problems. For the most part they were known centuries ago, even by such ancient theologians as Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome. They debated problems of apparent contradictions in their correspondence. I also discovered that results of sound scholarship have not tended to uncover more and more problems, as my professors were suggesting, still less disclose more and more "errors." Rather they have tended to resolve problems and show that what were once thought to be errors are not errors at all. Let me give some illustrations.

Second Kings 15:29 speaks of a king of Assyria named Tiglath-Pileser. He is said to have conquered the Israelites of the northern kingdom and to have taken many of them into captivity. A generation ago liberal scholars were saying that this king never existed, because they had no independent record of him, and that the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria was mythology. But then archaeologists excavated Tiglath-Pileser's capital city and found his name pressed into bricks which read: "I, Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria. . . am a conqueror from the Great Sea which is in the country of Amurru as far as the Great Sea which is in the Nairi country," that is the Mediterranean. In other words, archaeologists have found evidence not only of Tiglath-Pileser's existence, but even of the very campaign 2 Kings describes. The English reader can find accounts of these battles in James B. Prichard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*.

Here is another example: a generation ago scholars were saying that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, because, so the argument went, writing was not known in Moses' day. That seemed irrefutable at the time because, if writing was not known in Moses' day, Moses could not have known how to write, and if Moses did not know how to write, he could not have written the Pentateuch. But in

this case, it was the underlying premise that was wrong. As it turns out, not only was writing known in Moses' day, there were actually many written languages. Today we know of at least six different languages from the very area of the world in which Moses led the Israelites for forty years.

My favorite example is a personal one. At the end of 1974 *Time* magazine ran a cover story entitled, "How True Is the Bible?" It surveyed the liberal attacks on the Bible's reliability and concluded, somewhat as I did after my study of what the evidence in this area has proved, that the credibility of the Bible has actually grown in recent decades.

I found it interesting that the Bible was being defended by a secular magazine. But I said to myself, "I'm going to have to wait two weeks to see the letters that come in reaction to this, because I can't believe that the liberal scholars will ignore it." Sure enough. Two weeks later there were two strong letters from two of the most prominent critics: Martin Marty, a regular writer for the *Christian Century*, and Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School. One of them ended—I do not remember which one—"The faith of your Bible believers is the opposite of biblical faith!" I was offended. I said to myself, "That's terribly unfair. *Time* has presented a balanced article. It hasn't even claimed inerrancy, only historical reliability, and these men can't even stand to have the Bible called reliable." I got so angry, I had to stop and pray. I think the Lord answered me by saying, "Don't worry about it. It's not bothering me, why should it bother you. Go on and read the magazine."

So I did. There was a report of an archeological expedition in the southern area of the Sinai peninsula under the direction of a Jewish archeologist named Beno Rothenberg. He had been working at a place called "Solomon's mines" because an ancient smelting operation had been there, and he wanted to find out if the area had really been worked by Jews, and who had begun it.

Rothenberg discovered that the area had been occupied by Jewish workmen at the time of Solomon. So it may truly have been where Solomon melted down his gold for the temple. But then he pushed back through the strata at the site and discovered



that this ancient foundry had been developed originally by the Midianites. Midianites? Time knew that few of its readers would have any idea who the Midianites were. So the writer explained: ". . . the Midianites, a little-known people who dwelled in the area and are identified in Genesis as the first metal workers."

At that point I began to understand why the Lord was urging me to go on and read the magazine. Because of all the places where that little bit of Bible verification could have appeared, it was in the very issue in which the liberal scholars were objecting, "The faith of your Bible believers is the opposite of biblical faith." The Holy Spirit really does have a sense of humor.

## THE SUFFICIENCY OF GOD'S WORD

I want to say here, however, that important as I believe the matter of inerrancy is—and I do believe it, I believe churches will flounder and die if this is forgotten. Important as this is, I do not think it is the most critical issue about the Bible facing the American church today. The issue I would pinpoint today is the sufficiency of God's Word.

I would ask the questions: Do we really believe that God has given us what we need in this Book? Or do we think we have to supplement the Bible with other man-made things? Do we need sociological techniques to do evangelism? Do we need psychology and psychiatry for Christian growth? Do we need extra-biblical signs or miracles for guidance? Is the Bible's teaching adequate for achieving social progress and reform?

The reason I believe this is important is that it is possible to believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and yet neglect it and effectually repudiate it just because we think that it is not great enough for today's tasks and that other things need to be brought in to supplement the revelation. I think this is exactly what many evangelicals and evangelical churches are doing.

Three passages, Psalm 19, Matthew 4, and 2 Timothy are probably the most important passages in the Bible about the nature of the Word of God. The first contrasts it with God's

general revelation. The second shows how Jesus used the Bible to overcome temptation. The third is Paul's advice to Timothy in view of the terrible times he saw coming. But notice: each passage stresses that it is the Word of God **alone** that is sufficient for these challenges.

Psalm 19 speaks of the wonderful revelation of God in nature. But then it continues:

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul.  
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,  
making wise the simple.  
The precepts of the LORD are right,  
giving joy to the heart.  
The commands of the LORD are radiant,  
giving light to the eyes.  
The fear of the LORD is pure,  
enduring forever.  
The ordinances of the LORD are sure  
and altogether righteous.  
They are more precious than gold,  
than much pure gold.  
They are sweeter than honey,  
than honey from the comb.  
By them is your servant warned,  
and in keeping them there is great reward  
(Psalm 19:7-11).

The revelation of God in nature is wonderful, but it is limited.

By contrast, the revelation of God in Scripture is perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, sure, precious, sweet, and rewarding. By what language would it be possible for the psalmist more effectively to emphasize the complete and utter sufficiency of God's Word?

In Matthew 4 we discover the sufficiency of the Word of God in times of temptation, for it was by quotations from Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:16 and 6:13, that Jesus withstood Satan. Jesus did not reason with Satan without Scripture. He did not resort to

supernatural power or ask God for some special sign or intervention. He knew the Bible, stood on it, and used it forcefully.

Second Timothy 3 is the same. Paul is warning his young protégé against the terrible times coming in the last days. They will be days like ours, in which "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." And if that is not terrible enough, they will be days in which these vices will be found even in the churches. For they will be found among those "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

What is Timothy to do when such days come? Surely Paul must have some secret new weapon, some unexpected trick for him to use. No, that is not what we find. Instead of something new, we find Paul recommending what Timothy has had all along—the Word of God—because the Bible is sufficient even for terrible times like these. "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

## SUFFICIENT IN ALL AREAS

But it is not only that the Word of God is sufficient for all times, even times like ours. It is also sufficient in all areas; that is, it is able to do all we need it to do and are commissioned to do as Christians.

Let me list a few of these areas:

1. **EVANGELISM.** The Word of God is sufficient for evangelism. Indeed, it is the only thing that works in evangelism. Everything else—captivating music, personal testimonies,

emotional appeals, even coming forward to make a commitment to Jesus Christ—all that is at best supplementary. And if it is used or depended upon apart from the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God, the “conversions” that result are spurious conversions, which is to say that those who respond do not actually become Christians. They become Christians in name only. The only way the Holy Spirit works to regenerate lost men and women is through the Word of God. Peter said it: “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

2. **SANCTIFICATION.** I preached on the book of Romans for eight years. I discovered many interesting things in that time. But the most significant for me was Paul’s approach to sanctification, which is not at all what we would expect or what many people today desire. When we think of sanctification today, most of us think of either one of two things. Either we think of a method (“Here are three steps to sanctification; do this and you will be holy”), or else we think of an experience (“You need a second work of grace, a baptism of the Holy Spirit,” or something).

Paul’s approach is to know the Bible and its teaching about what has been done for us by God in our salvation.

Paul makes this clear in the sixth chapter where he says, “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). This is the first time in the letter that Paul tells his readers to do something, and what they are to do is “count” or “reckon upon” the fact that God has done an irreversible work in their lives as a result of which they have died to sin (the verb is in the past tense, an aorist) and have been made alive to God in Christ Jesus. The only way they can understand what has happened to them is to know the Bible, which teaches them what has happened.

But then, because they know it, they are to go on with God, acting on the basis of what has been done. In other words, they cannot go back to being what they were before. They are new creatures in Christ. So the only thing they can do is get on with living the Christian life. There is no way for them to go but forward. That is the Bible’s approach to sanctification, and it has

nothing to do with either a method or an experience. It has everything to do with knowing and living by the sufficient Word of God.

**3. GUIDENCE.** Some years ago we had Phillip D. Jensen, the minister of St. Matthias Church in Sydney, Australia, with us for the Philadelphia Conferences on Reformed Theology. Mr. Jensen has written a book called *The Last Word on Guidance* whose sole point is that this “last word on guidance” is the Bible. That is what God has given us to indicate how we are to live and what we are to do to please Him. All we need is in the Bible. So if there is something we want or think we need that is not in the Bible—what job we should take, who we should marry, where we should live—it doesn’t matter what we do as long as we are obeying what God teaches about living a godly life. That doesn’t mean that God does not have a detailed plan for our lives. He does. He has a detailed plan for all things, ordering “whatsoever comes to pass,” as the Westminster Confession of Faith has it. But it does mean that we do not have to know this plan in advance and, indeed, cannot. What we can know and need to know is what God has told us in the Bible.

**4. SOCIAL REFORM.** The final area in which we need to be reminded that the Word of God is sufficient is for social renewal and reform. We are very concerned about this today and rightly so, because we live in a declining culture and we want to see the lordship of Jesus acknowledged and justice and true righteousness prevail. We want to see the poor relieved of bitter want and suffering. How is this to happen? I want to suggest that what is needed is not more government programs or increased emphasis on social work, but first and above all the teaching and practice of the Word of God.

## GENEVA UNDER CALVIN AS A CASE STUDY

I want to close with this important example: what happened in Geneva, Switzerland, in the sixteenth century through the ministry of John Calvin. In August of 1535 the Council of Two Hundred, which governed Geneva, voted to reject Catholicism

and align the city with the Protestant Reformation. They had very little idea what that meant. Up to this point the city had been notorious for its riots, gambling, indecent dancing, drunkenness, adultery, and other vices. People would literally run around the streets naked, singing indecent songs and blaspheming God. The people expected this state of affairs to continue, even after they had become Protestants, and the Council did not know what to do. The Council passed regulation after regulation designed to restrain the vice and remedy the situation. Nothing they tried worked. Public discipline and morals continued their decline.

Calvin came to Geneva in August 1536, a year after the change. He was practically ignored. He was not even paid the first year. Besides, as everybody knows, his first attempts to preach proved so unpopular that he was dismissed by the Council in 1538, and went to Strasbourg.

Calvin was happy in Strasbourg and had no desire to go back. When the situation got so bad in Geneva that public opinion turned to him again in desperation, he told his friend William Farel, "I should prefer a hundred other deaths than this cross on which I should have to die a thousand times a day."

Nevertheless, driven by a sense of duty, Calvin returned to Geneva on September 13, 1541. Calvin had no weapon but the Word of God. From the very first his emphasis had been on Bible teaching, and he returned to it now, picking up his exposition of Scripture at precisely the place he had left it three and a half years earlier. He preached from the Word every day, and under the power of that preaching the city began to change. As the Genevan people acquired knowledge of God's Word and allowed it to influence their behavior, their city became almost a New Jerusalem from which the Gospel spread to the rest of Europe, Great Britain, and the new world.

Moreover, this change made other changes possible. One student of this historical period wrote:

Cleanliness was practically unknown in towns of his generation and epidemics were common and numerous. He moved the Council to make permanent regulations for

establishing sanitary conditions and supervision of markets. Beggars were prohibited from the streets, but a hospital and poorhouse were provided and well conducted. Calvin labored zealously for the education of all classes and established the famous Academy, whose influence reached all parts of Europe and even to the British Isles. He urged the Council to introduce the cloth and silk industry and thus laid the foundation for the temporal wealth of Geneva. This industry . . . proved especially successful in Geneva because Calvin, through the gospel, created within the individual the love of work, honesty, thrift, and cooperation. He taught that capital was not an evil thing, but the blessed result of honest labor and that it could be used for the welfare of mankind. Countries under the influence of Calvinism were invariably connected with growing industry and wealth. . .

It is no mere coincidence that religious and political liberty arose in those countries where Calvinism had penetrated most deeply.

There has probably never been a clearer example of extensive moral and social reform than the transformation of Geneva under John Calvin, and it was accomplished almost entirely by the preaching of God's Word.

## CONCLUSION

I take you back to the third chapter of 2 Timothy. Paul encouraged Timothy to continue on the path of ministry he has been walking because "from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Why is the Bible able to do that? It is because it is "God-breathed." That is, it is the very Word of God and therefore carries with it the authority and power of God. Yes, and it is useful too. It is useful for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

That is exactly it. That is what we need. It is what everybody needs. And only the Word of God is sufficient for it.



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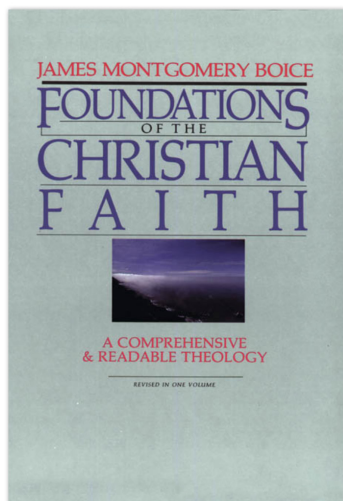
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