

Christian Basics

CHAPTER TWO

The Bible

HERE IS WHY THIS CHAPTER IS IMPORTANT

- It is important to know the NATURE of the Bible and HOW to read it ■
1. We must understand how the Bible was put together and preserved
 2. We must understand how the rules of literature apply to the Bible
 3. We must understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of the Bible

When you hold a Bible in your hand you are holding a miracle. Stop for a minute and think about the implications of this. It may sound like an exaggeration, but consider the following section in *Christian Basics* and then decide for yourself.

Jesus said that if we hold to his teaching we would know the truth. The Bible is THE central source of authority for knowing the teachings of Jesus. The Bible is a book that can be trusted. The Bible is the best and most trustworthy source for obtaining a correct view of the Christian faith.

ATTITUDE ALERT

Some people hold to the idea that there is either no God or at least that there is no supernatural intervention by God in the affairs of human beings. This can lead to an anti-supernatural bias that can divest the Bible of credibility and power. This is an ALERT to bring to light a presupposition that might prevent a well-balanced and fair study of the Bible. We all live with presuppositions in the way we think about the world. We see the world through these presuppositions. It is normal. Please give this second chapter a fair reading and then decide if those people holding to an anti-supernatural presupposition are justified in doing so.

The issue of the supernatural nature of the Bible is a very important point to consider. Many of the controversies over the reliability and validity of the Bible can be better understood if the philosophy and presuppositions undergirding the arguments can be recognized. Some people have a philosophy, or world view, that will not allow for the supernatural. Others have a world view that will allow for the supernatural.

Please consider the following sections in this chapter on the Bible. And please keep an ATTITUDE of openness to consider the possibility of a miracle-working God behind the inspiration and preservation of the Bible.

Section One

THE MIRACLE OF THE BIBLE

Here is a way to think about the Bible. The first verse in the Bible says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). If this first verse can be believed, then it follows that we can also believe it is possible for God to intervene in his creation. If God can intervene in his creation, then it is possible that God could cause a book to be written and preserved over a long period of time. He could also cause this book to be accurate and trustworthy. What I am saying is that it is not difficult for a God who can create the universe to also cause a book to be constructed under his watchful eye. Let’s begin our study of the Bible with this idea in mind: the Bible is both a supernaturally inspired and a supernaturally preserved book. When you hold a Bible in your hand you are holding a miracle.

1. THE MIRACLE OF CONSISTENCY

The Bible tells one totally integrated, continuous story from beginning to end. From Genesis to Revelation there is a continuous story of God reaching out to his creation. It tells, with complete harmony within itself, one consistent and continuous account of God’s involvement in human history. The Bible shows how God relates to his creation from the very beginning all the way to the end of time itself.

What makes the consistency of the Bible so amazing (and a miracle) is that the Bible is not just one book. The Bible is made up of 66 books. Each one is in agreement with the other. Furthermore, the Bible was not written by only one person in only one setting. It was written by over forty different authors and written over a time span of 1500 years. It was written on three different continents and in three different languages.

Think about this. Imagine if you were given the task of writing a book that was to be as profound as the Bible. It would have to speak about many controversial subjects regarding life and death, history, poetry and predictive prophecy. It would have to be written in complete harmony with itself and then fit together as a complete unit. Keep in mind that this project must span 1500 years. How would you start? You might start by realizing that you might not be alive for 1500 years. For anyone to take up and continue such a grand project would be an absolute impossibility. There would be no one around to carry in on for 1500 years (never mind spreading it over three continents and three different languages). The point is that it would be beyond the realm of human possibility. Nobody could do it – nobody but God. As someone once said, “The Bible is not such a book a man would write if he could, or could write if he would.”

The miracle of the Bible is that it is not a book of human origin. It has the mark of having been written by a supernatural author – God. This is what we mean when we say that the Bible is inspired. As we move through this section we will discover what is meant by the claim that the Bible is a divinely inspired book. There are two very important verses from the New Testament that speak of the inspiration of the Bible.

All Scripture is God-breathed and 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 3:16-17(NIV)

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1:20-21 (NIV)

As you read and contemplate the meaning of these two quotes from the Bible please notice how much God has had his hand in the writing of the Bible. Contemplate also how God has used certain specially chosen men and, through them, caused his words to be recorded and then preserved all the way up to this present time.

TIME OUT

Take time out in your study to work toward the memorization of the two Scripture portions just mentioned. Bible memorization is a skill that should be a part of every believer's life. A helpful hint is to think of the category these two quotes fall into: "Where does it say that the Bible is inspired? Oh, I remember. It was 2 Timothy and 2 Peter." Not only will you be able to encourage your own faith, but also you will be able to encourage someone else along the way.

Write out 2 Timothy 3:15-16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21 fully on little note cards and carry them around with you until they become a part of your life. Memorize them.

We have just looked briefly at the miracle of the continuity of the Bible. It is an amazing book to have been written over such a long period of time and with so much potential for contradiction. Yet, it tells one complete and harmonious story. There is no other book (66 books) in existence like it in the world. This miraculous consistency is one of the reasons that the Bible can be considered to be an inspired and infallible source for the Christian faith.

2. THE MIRACLE OF SURVIVAL

It is very important to know that when we say that the Bible is inspired and infallible we are speaking of the original writings, not the copies. The original writings have long since disappeared and we are now left with copies of the originals. How are we to judge the truth and accuracy of the copies compared to the original writings? This is a crucial question. Please be aware that the question of the accuracy and the reliability of copying is not only a problem for the Bible, but for all ancient literature as well. We have no original manuscripts of any ancient writing, but copies. There is an answer to this problem that will actually serve to strengthen our faith in the reliability of the Bible.

It is amazing to think that the Bible we hold in our hands is writing that has been preserved for well over 3,000 years in the Old Testament and for nearly 2,000 years in the New Testament. Part of the reason for this is that God himself raised up a people who would be caretakers of his word. These caretakers were the Jews. As far back as the time of Moses we can read where God told Moses to write down the words that he was given (Exodus 17:14). The Ten Commandments were to be kept in the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:16). God's words were a crucial and vital part of the lives of the Jews. Later, the kings were commanded to write down their own copies of the law so they might follow it closely (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). Keeping and preserving God's word was the central issue to God and his people. It was by no accident that the Jews have been called "the people of the Book."

The ancient Jews were also a culture of memory. God's word was memorized and passed on with incredible accuracy. A deeper look into the Old Testament will reveal that much of it was written in such a way as to foster retention. Parallelisms, alliterations and plays on words abound. It is not easy to carry these literary devices over into other language translations, but, it can be seen how these devices would facilitate memory and retention over many generations.

In the transmission of the texts there was a very unique group of people who religiously took on the challenge of accurate copying. These were the scribes. They treated their work as a holy undertaking. They counted the words and they counted the lines on each page (or scroll section). Even the letters were counted. Errors were to be feared. After all, they were engaged in the transmission of the holy word of God who himself commanded that no one add or subtract from his words (Deuteronomy 12:32).

This should help to point out that the common criticisms used to discount the accuracy of the transmission of the Bible are weak. The common criticism using the old "telephone" party game does not apply here. In the telephone game the message passed on was intentionally kept a secret and divergent messages were expected and enjoyed. The scribes were not playing a game and the message was not kept secret. Their copies were under the scrutiny of rigorous checks and counter-checks. The Bible was indeed copied with the utmost care and precision.

To help illustrate how well the manuscripts were copied let's take a quick look at a comparison of the ancient writings of Plato and Aristotle with the writings of the Bible. We do not have the original manuscripts of Plato or Aristotle. It is interesting that the accuracy the copies of the works of these two ancient writers are seldom questioned.

Plato and Aristotle lived around 350 B.C. The earliest manuscripts from their works range from about A.D. 900 to A.D. 1100. There are only a handful of these oldest copies in existence. Few people doubt the accuracy and reliability of these copies even though there is a time span averaging about 1300 years between the original writings and the copies that now exist. The confidence scholars enjoy for the copies of Plato and Aristotle should be a tremendous encouragement for the readers of the Bible. When we compare the manuscript evidence of the Bible I'm sure you will see that our confidence in the Bible is not without good reason.

Let's look at a comparative example from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Up until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the earliest copy of Isaiah was dated at approximately A.D. 900. Since Isaiah prophesied around 700 B.C. this would leave us with a time gap of 1600 years. A copy of Isaiah was found in a cave near the Dead Sea in 1948. This copy can be dated to the year 100 B.C. This discovery enabled the experts to view something extremely rare: manuscripts that were separated by 1000 years (with no copies in between). Upon comparison it has been found that there was very little difference except in some spellings and other minor details. There was nothing to render the book of Isaiah even close to being considered untrustworthy. This should serve as an amazing example of the reliability of the Old Testament. Remember, there was a clearly documented 1,000 year difference. This is tangible, physical evidence of trustworthy copying that is mindboggling.

It would be good at this point to show how much confidence Jesus placed in the Old Testament.

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. Luke 24:27 (NIV)

I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. Matthew 5:18 (NIV)

It is obvious from the mouth of Jesus himself that he had no trouble trusting in the reliability of the Scriptures. Again and again he called people to account based on what was written. Please note that we have essentially the same Old Testament today that was in existence at the time of Christ. Jesus' own opinion of the Scriptures should never be forgotten in our study of the topic of the reliability of the Bible.

When the New Testament is considered the manuscript evidence skyrockets. Most of the New Testament was written between the years A.D. 50-90. The earliest complete copy is from around A.D. 300 (although partial copies and fragments are older). This would give us a gap of 200 years that is much smaller than that for other ancient manuscripts. There are around 5,000 copies in existence along with thousands more in languages other than the original Greek. If we add to this the many notes and quotes taken from the New Testament that can be gleaned from other ancient writings, we then have an overwhelming wealth of material to help us check on the accuracy of what we hold in our hands today. Compare all this to what we have in the examples of Plato and Aristotle and you can begin to see that our high opinion of the Bible is not unreasonable.

Biblical scholar, Bruce Metzger, commented as he was discussing the manuscript evidence for the writings of Homer and other authors of ancient literature as it compared to the biblical manuscript evidence.

In contrast with these figures, the textual critic of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of his material. Furthermore, the work of many an ancient author has been preserved only in manuscripts which date from the Middle Ages (sometimes the late Middle Ages), far removed from the time at which he lived and wrote. On the contrary, the time between the composition of the books of the New Testament and the earliest extant copies is relatively brief.¹

I hope this encounter, with what I hope was not tedious detail, has helped to demonstrate that the Bible has been copied and transmitted faithfully. Therefore, it is not wishful thinking to say that we can trust the authority of the Scriptures. The manuscript evidence is tangible testimony to the miracle of the survival of the Bible. The consistency of the 66 books in our Bible is a miracle that we can hold in our hands.

3. THE MIRACLE OF PROPHECY

What is prophecy? It is two things: the foretelling of events before they happen and the forth-telling of God's message, i.e., speaking for God. We will be concerned here with the foretelling of future events.

It is interesting just how easily most people accept the idea of prophecy. Every year the magazine stands are full of predictions by all of the latest soothsayers. The tales of Nostradamus and his prognostications hold people in awe. Every year there seems to be a new prophet stepping up the plate to hit a home run. It is important to know that according to the Bible they all strike out. First, most of these predictions do not come to pass. Secondly, most of them are vague or they are about mundane topics with little effect upon history. History marches on without being impacted or enlightened by these empty predictions.

Bible prophecy is set apart from common prophecy due to the demands of an extreme standard. The biblical standard is much higher because the things predicted must come to pass with 100% accuracy. It almost doesn't sound fair does it? The mistake many people make is to place the world's common standard of "anything goes" prophecy upon the Bible. There is the popular idea that prophecy can be defined as rather loose predictions that may or may not come to pass as predicted. This hit-or-miss variety of making predictions is a different definition from what constitutes biblical prophecy. The Bible explicitly and strictly allows for no error.

One time in Israel's history God reassured the people that he would send them prophets just like Moses once Moses was no longer with them. How would they know that the prophet was actually speaking for God?

¹ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 34.

You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him. Deuteronomy 18:21-22 (NIV)

It should stand to reason that anyone coming forward as a prophet of God would only speak of things that would come true. The premise being that God makes no mistakes. This is a very stringent test that we must still apply today to those claiming to be speaking for God in the realm of predictive prophecy. The demands of such a test would eliminate a lot of what is going on in contemporary prophetic circles and rescue people from harmful deception. This test also directs a bright light on the prophecies that are already contained in the Bible for all to read. The biblical test of prophecy is 100% accuracy.

The study of prophecy in the Bible is an exciting one. It not only strengthens our faith, but it also helps prove that the Bible is not a man-made book. Predicting the future is the province of God. Anyone else who has tried to predict the future has met with failure. We must not let this point pass without recognizing its profound importance: only God can predict the future and his predictions are recorded in the Bible as HIS word.

I am God, and there is no other. I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. Isaiah 46:9-10

There are many prophecies in the Bible that were fulfilled exactly as predicted. The more your study of the Bible deepens, the more of these prophecies you will discover. Your faith will grow stronger as a result. There are prophecies concerning many foreign nations other than Israel, prophecies concerning kings and queens, prophecies about world events and prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. Biblical prophecies are not of the parlor game variety. They have a profound effect upon the history of the world. As an example, let's look at a few regarding Jesus. There were many prophecies about Jesus written hundreds of years before he came into the world. Here are just a few examples from the New Testament book of Matthew.

The prophet Nathan told King David that a descendent of David's would be king forever. The reign of every other king ended naturally, including David's. Not so with this king. This prophecy was recorded in 2 Samuel 7:12-14 and fulfilled about 1000 years later. "...Jesus Christ, son of David" (Matthew 1:1). Jesus Christ will reign forever.

Here's another example. Matthew quoted from the prophet Isaiah, who lived around 700 B.C. He related one of Isaiah's prophecies (Isaiah 7:14) directly to the birth of Jesus. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'" (Matthew 1:22-23).

When the magi came to visit the baby Jesus they first came to Herod who then asked the religious leaders where the Christ was to be born. They answered, “In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel’” (Matthew 2:5-6). They quoted a well-known prophecy from the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2) who lived at least 600 years before the events foretold took place. The Bible is full of prophetic statements about Jesus Christ. Read the words of Jesus himself as he commented on the prophecies that were concerning him.

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. Luke 24:2-27

When Jesus said, “Moses and all the Prophets,” it was a common way of referring to all of the Old Testament. This should help confirm the fact that many things were foretold about Jesus in the Old Testament. Furthermore, Jesus wanted people to be aware of this fact. I would love to have been at that Bible study as Jesus expounded upon the Old Testament Scriptures that were in reference to himself.

Bible prophecy makes for very interesting study. There is no other book like the Bible containing hundreds of specific prophecies that can be proven historically accurate. This is a very important point that gives further credence to the miraculous nature of the Bible.

Another way to think about biblical prophecy is to think of it as God having left his “calling cards” all throughout history. It is now up to us to dig-in and see how he has done this. These calling cards function as a kind of time capsule locked within historic events. No one can go back and change what was written. They are scattered all throughout the Bible. The fact that these prophecies were written down for posterity places God’s word to open scrutiny for all to see.

Beyond Bible prophecy there are also many prophetic events that occurred in Israel’s history that foreshadow the nature and the ministry of the Messiah. These events have been called types and shadows or prefigurations of Christ. For example there is the tabernacle and priesthood system. A careful study of this sacrificial system will unlock astounding portraits of Christ. Another place for fruitful study is the Feasts of the LORD. The Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles all have prophetic implications concerning Jesus Christ. There are many more that may be studied, such as, the manna, the rock, and the bronze serpent in the wilderness.

These are the things that set the Bible apart from being just an ordinary book. It is a book directly inspired by God. Since it is a book from God with a message from God, we have every reason to believe that the message it contains has the power to change lives.

4. THE MIRACLE OF POWER

The Bible is a book of power. I am not saying that it is a book of enchantment like a magic talisman or a lucky charm. God's word is alive by the power of the Holy Spirit to bring change in the lives of those who put their trust in Christ. Since God is alive we believe he can, and does, work through his word.

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4:12-13

The Bible has power to answer the ultimate and essential questions that have plagued humanity from the beginning of history: Who are we? Where are we going? Why are we here?

The Bible has power because it is designed to lead people to Christ. When people meet Jesus things change. The Bible is ultimately about Jesus. "...the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10). Jesus alluded to this when he was berating the religious leaders for rejecting him. "You diligently study the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). Jesus was referring to one of the main purposes of the Scriptures: to lead people to Christ so that they can enter into a life-changing relationship with God through him.

The source of the spiritual power that is inherent in the Bible is from the Holy Spirit. (We will look more deeply into the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the last chapter in, *The Christian Basics*, on the Trinity). We must be aware that the power, or leverage, to change a person's life comes from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will use the word of God. The Bible is a spiritual book inspired by the Holy Spirit. All people reading Scripture must have the supernatural help of the Holy Spirit. Part of this mystery is explained in the following passage.

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Corinthians 2:14

Hopefully, being aware of the necessity for spiritual help in reading and understanding the message contained in the Bible will cause people to read it with a new sense of humility. Humility mixed with faith can go a long way to paving the way for the power of God's word to penetrate deeply into the heart of the sincere reader.

Please review :

The four main reasons for considering the Bible a miracle you can hold in your hand:

1. The miracle of consistency – God’s inspiration down through time
2. The miracle of survival – God’s providence in protection and preservation
3. The miracle of prophecy – God’s omniscience in knowing the future
4. The miracle of power – God’s will in drawing and nurturing a people for himself.

We have looked at the miracle of the Bible. I hope now, considering all the facts presented, that to call the Bible “a miracle that we can hold in our hands” is not an overstatement. Now let’s look at another feature of the Bible.

Section Two

THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is sufficient in all matters dealing with the faith and practice of the Christian faith. In other words, other than the Bible, no other writings, nor any other human organization, may serve as the measure of what is ultimately true and valid pertaining to Christian doctrine and practice. The Bible is the sole authority. The authority of Scripture trumps all.

The question often comes up concerning other religious writings. How can we ignore all the other religious writings and cling only to the Bible? Isn’t that being unfair to all the other religions in the world? Questions such as these force us to take a close look at why we view the Bible as the sole sufficient source of revelation about God and the Christian faith.

This is where the concept of “canon” enters the scene. The word “canon” comes from an old word that means “cane.” A reed cane would often be used as a measuring rod in the ancient world. Canon is the term used for writings that “measure up” as worthy of being Scripture. All writings had to fit certain criteria. If they passed the tests for canon (measuring rod) they were accepted.

THE TEST FOR THE OLD TESTAMENT

The canon of the Old Testament was not in question in Jesus’ day. The Jews themselves had settled the question at least 100 years before Jesus came on the scene. Many times other writings were considered, but were rejected and not added to the Old Testament. When Jesus referred to “Moses and the Prophets” he was referring to the Old Testament that is essentially the same as we have today.

The major test (canon) for all Scripture comes from God's own direct command.

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. Deuteronomy 13:1-4

The principle of orthodoxy (straight teaching) comes from the direct command from God contained in Deuteronomy 13. All teaching and writing that is to be considered Scripture must conform to what has been authentically revealed previously. A simple example of the principle of orthodoxy would be that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would not reveal to one of his true prophets that there were many gods. We have already been instructed that there is only one God. No writing could come later and contradict this and at the same time be considered Scripture. It would be rejected based on the principle of orthodoxy as declared in Deuteronomy 13. It would not pass the test of canon.

It is good to think for a while about the potential impact of the principles contained in Deuteronomy 13:1-4 and 18:21-22.

Deuteronomy 18 If a prophet's prediction failed to come to pass, he would by God's standards, be a false prophet.

Deuteronomy 13 All teaching must be in total harmony with what was taught in the past.

Since these two restrictive guidelines were followed it was very difficult for false teaching to creep into the Bible during its formation. God raised up prophets to exhort his people to adhere to the principles and laws in Scripture. The Scriptures were to be the standard to guide them.

THE TEST FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament also had to meet the guidelines of both Deuteronomy 13 and 18 that were mentioned before. Not just any writing could be called Scripture. There had to be certain qualifications regarding authorship and there could be no errors in history or other relevant facts.

It might sound like a strange concept at first, but the church did not proclaim which books belonged in the New Testament as much as they were discovered. The books that promoted faith and edification had a way of rising above all others. They eventually became universally recognized, while the less influential writings fell out of use. This is not to say that there wasn't much discussion and struggle over certain books. By the late fourth century the issue was largely settled. We can confidently say that the books we now have in our New Testament were the result of the most careful and meticulous consideration.

THE CLOSED CANON

The concept of the closed canon means that no new Scripture can be added to what we now have. The canon was closed shortly after the last of the original Apostles died. Even though it took a few hundred years for the issue to be settled, the Apostles had the final authority. There is now no one else with the authority to speak for God and then have it recorded as Scripture. Nothing has been added for 2,000 years and nothing will be added.

Once the principle of the closed canon is understood it might make for interesting study to see what was rejected as Scripture. There is a collection of writings that were not included in the Old Testament. They are called the “Apocrypha.” Although the Roman Catholic Bible contains these books, both the Jewish Scriptures and Protestant Bibles have excluded them. Any people who wish to read the apocryphal writings may do so and see for themselves what is contained in them. They are not forbidden reading.

There were also writings that were not included in the New Testament. The believing community rejected them on the same grounds as what determined the Old Testament canon.

The principle of the closed canon and the absolute authority of Scripture is a crucial one today. Many religious organizations and cult leaders have been able to garner authority for themselves in direct violation of this principle and have led many people astray. This should make us aware of the dangers involved in adding to, or subtracting from, the word of God as contained in our Bible.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

It is very important to know that God has given the individual believer the responsibility to discern what conforms to Scriptural truth. We are not to leave it up to an outside authority to make these decisions for us. This is not to say that we should not be advised or instructed, but that the ultimate responsibility lies with each believer. Jesus said,

False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible. Matthew 24:24 (NIV)

Jesus gave us this solemn warning. It is a warning we cannot ignore. The question often arises, how are we to discern between a false teacher and a true teacher? There have been many leaders with overpowering charisma who have led many people into danger. Jesus said that even if they performed miraculous signs and miracles they still could be false teachers. Most people would have little reluctance attributing divine status to a leader who was able to display a miracle for all to see. We’ve been warned that even a miracle was not to set the standard for truth. The standard is the Bible. Let’s look at three examples of how we are to discern truth from error.

1. The Example of the Bereans

The apostle Paul was traveling from city to city preaching the gospel. He had difficulty in Thessalonica. Many of the town’s people managed to cause such a ruckus that Paul barely escaped with his life. As he entered the city of Berea he began to preach the gospel there, but this time with different results.

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Acts 17:11 (NIV)

Please notice that Paul was not offended when the Bereans checked out his teachings to see if they were in line with the whole of Scripture. They applied the test of Deuteronomy 13 to make sure everything Paul taught was in harmony with Scripture.

Many people have the false idea that when a famous (or not so famous) Bible teacher gets behind a pulpit no one else is supposed to check out what is being taught. Some might even say that it would be judgmental to do so. However, we are supposed to judge all teaching and preaching in the light of what has already been revealed to us plainly in the Bible. Notice how Paul commended the Bereans for doing just that. It should further be noted that even the great Apostle Paul placed himself under this same abiding principle. It should follow that any trustworthy preacher or Bible teacher would want to do the same.

2. The Example of the Galatians

There is a very important section in the letter to the church in Galatia that quite powerfully reinforces the necessity of discerning truth. Paul began his letter to the Galatians by taking them to task for allowing themselves to be wrongly influenced by false teachers.

I am so astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned. Galatians 1:6-9 (NIV)

It is important to notice that Paul placed the responsibility of determining true and false teaching squarely on the believers themselves. They were to be so trained and well versed in the Scriptures that they should be able to detect false teaching. Notice also that Paul placed himself under this same scrutiny. Paul could have very well pulled rank if he wanted to do so because of his unique calling, directly from Jesus, as an Apostle. But Paul did not exclude himself from the same standard that applies to all. Many teachers today should take a lesson from the great Apostle Paul and submit their teachings to the authority of Scripture just as Paul did.

Another thing to be aware of is that Paul even included supernatural visitations from an angel into his warning. How many people today would fall all over themselves to adhere to most any teaching if a real visible angel taught it? It would make headlines and be on every talk show and news program. The whole world would be following the teaching from this angel. Paul cautioned us to be wary of supernatural visitations that might be false. Even things that might be taught by an angel from heaven must be under the same strict guidelines. All teaching must line up with what has been previously revealed in the Bible – as prescribed in Deuteronomy 13:1-4. There would be no exceptions. Most cults and dangerous teachings would collapse if these guidelines were followed today.

3. Example From 1 John

The warning in John’s first letter is very powerful and direct. When the entire context of the Bible is considered it becomes evident that one of the common recurring themes is that there has always been the danger of false prophets. The same is still true to this day.

*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.
1 John 4:1 (NIV)*

No teacher, no preacher, no evangelist, nor any organization is exempt from having their teachings tested for biblical orthodoxy. All must be subject to the objective test of sound biblical truth. Jesus said that many false prophets would arise. Jesus gave this warning 2,000 years ago. The warning still stands today. This has been an ongoing, ever-present problem for God’s people since the beginning of time itself.

TIME OUT

This would be a good time to stop and review the two major tests for biblical truth from the Old Testament. First, we have Deuteronomy 13:1-4. This is the test for orthodoxy (straight teaching). Orthodoxy is teaching that lines up with what has been previously revealed in the Bible. Then there is Deuteronomy 18:21-22. This is the test of 100% accuracy in predictive prophecy.

We can see in the New Testament where these two tests were reinforced: Luke 24:25-27; Acts 17:11; Galatians 1:6-9 and 1 John 4:1.

- First – Memorize where these can be located in the Bible.
- Second – Be very familiar with the principle of the test for biblical orthodoxy.

Memorize this chart:

| | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Old Testament Tests: | Deuteronomy 13:1-4 | 18:21-22 |
| New Testament Examples: | Luke 24:25-27 | Acts 17:11 |
| | Galatians 1:6-9 | 1 John 4:1 |

Section Three

THE PROPER READING OF THE BIBLE

Sometimes it seems that people have come up with so many different interpretations of the Bible that it can be made to appear as though the Bible can say or mean almost anything. Bernard Ramm stated the problem this way:

The result of erratic interpretation is that the Bible has been made the source of confusion rather than light. “There is no folly, no God-dishonoring theology, no iniquity, no sacerdotal puerility,” writes Edward White, “for which chapter and verse may not be cited by an enslaved intelligence. And under these circumstances it is impossible to express in adequate terms the importance of a correct estimate and exposition of ‘The Bible’” (*Inspiration*, p. 153). In Bassanio’s mouth Shakespeare puts these words: “In religion, what damned error but some sober brow will bless it, and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament” (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, scene 2).²

Well, that sure got my attention. There are many ways to discuss the proper reading of the Bible. I would like to focus on four major themes.

1. The Language of the Bible Is Clear

The Bible was not written for elite scholarly theologians. It was written for the regular people of the day. This does not mean that we do not need some help in understanding certain passages. There are some difficult portions of Scripture that may require some assistance. However, the implication of biblical clarity is that the language allows most people to grasp its basic teachings. It is dangerous to think that there are secret codes or deep hidden messages that can only be discerned by those who are spiritually gifted in some mysterious way. We are not supposed to have an unhealthy dependence on any other person or organization for interpretation. The Apostle John wrote the following as a warning:

26 I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. 27 As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. 1 John 2:26-27 (NIV)

The Bible declares that God has given the church gifted teachers, but John is warning us about the danger of abdicating our responsibility to read the Bible for ourselves. Many people have allowed certain leaders and/or organizations to twist the plain meaning of Scripture. The consequences have often been tragic. We also must be careful not to use the difficulties that do exist in the Bible as an excuse for not reading it. The force behind the principle of the clarity of the language of the Bible is that the plain meaning is generally clear for all to read and understand.

² Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 3.

What about the things that are difficult to understand? Anyone who takes up the challenge of studying the Bible will encounter difficult teachings. Think of it this way: if God told you 10,000 things that were absolutely true and understandable, couldn't you trust him for the three or four things that you do not yet understand? Sometimes in our Bible study we may have trouble with certain passages only to find a suitable solution at a later time. On that note, there may even be some biblical problems that will not be solved until we see Jesus face-to-face. However, we can trust him for what we do know.

2. The Literal Method of Interpretation

The literal method of interpretation means that we interpret the Bible according to the normal rules of language common for all literature. In other words, we do not reserve a separate formula for the Bible and then utilize another set of rules for all other literature. To read the Bible while neglecting the normal rules of literature robs the language of the Bible of its intended meaning and leads to many errors. The Bible was written with all the rules of language that human beings have used throughout literary history. The literal method is the same method that we use when we read the daily newspaper or any other piece of literature. In fact, we use the literal method of interpretation in everyday life without even being aware of it. This is the normal way that language works.

I often like to use the daily newspaper as an example of how we all can readily sense and use the literal (literary) method of interpreting language. The commentaries written by the sports columnists make for an interesting case study in the literal approach. Let me quote one of our local sports reporters as he has written about the woes of our NFL team, the San Diego Chargers. The occasion was after a humiliating loss to the Kansas City Chiefs.

“Sinking (glub) Into Humiliation (glub, glub)”

This one didn't carry enough lifeboats. And, somewhere not far away, I thought I heard a band playing the Chargers Give Up Song over the whine of overused bilge pumps. There may have been a last, desperate fight by the Chargers to remain afloat last week, when they managed to hang on to the log that was the Kansas City Chiefs, but they went down for good yesterday. (S.D. Union/Tribune, Nick Canepa, 12-4-00)

I doubt that any reasonable person took this article in a strictly wooden literal sense. To do so would have been absurd and definitely not the plain meaning intended by the author. Instead, most people would automatically employ the literal sense, that is, they would rightly recognize the figures of speech, hyperboles, metaphors and idioms that are particular to football fans (and to creative sports writers).

The same can be said of the Bible. For example, there are descriptions of God having us under the protective shelter of his wings. The normal use of the literal method should cause us to easily recognize that this is figurative language. It would be an error to think that God actually has wings. There are times when certain authors have used poetry, historical narrative and other genres of literature. All of these genres of have nuances that help make literature interesting and memorable. These are the nuances that must be recognized when reading the Bible just like they need to be recognized by any intelligent reader of the newspaper.

3. The Rule of Context

The first rule of context is that individual words get their meaning from the context in which they are placed. It is a mistake to assign a meaning to a word separated from the text that surrounds it. For example, the word “trunk” can have a multitude of meanings until it is read in its context. The context will determine the correct meaning. The word “trunk” will mean something different to a car salesman, a world traveler, a tree trimmer and an elephant trainer.

Many people have made grave mistakes in biblical interpretation because they have allowed themselves, or someone else, to give meaning to biblical words out of context.

The second rule of context is to check a small portion of Scripture against the whole of Scripture. A few verses taken out of context can be twisted to mean a lot of things that may contradict the whole context of the Bible. This is a common error and has led to many difficulties. The extreme cases, for example, would be the teachings of Jim Jones that led to the Jonestown disaster and the teachings of David Koresh that led to the Waco tragedy. A review of their teachings would easily show that they led their followers astray by the misuse of Scripture.

The rules of context are an important component in properly reading the Bible. People have been deceived by teaching that they would otherwise have recognized as false had they taken the time to apply the rule of context.

4. The Rule of Faith

It is common to hear skeptics say that faith is what we don't know, but science is what we do know. This suggests that there is no faith in science and no knowledge in faith. It is unfortunate that many people adhere to this bad definition of faith. To the skeptic, faith is not reasonable. By their definition faith is *supposed* to be unreasonable. This is NOT the biblical definition of faith.

The Bible gives us a good definition of faith:

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.
Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

Being sure means that we have enough proof to win our trust. We have a new reality opened up for us that creates a substantial basis for believing. Being certain implies that we have evidence to back up our certainty. This evidence serves as our proof.

Reading the Bible in faith will mean that we will approach our reading with an active, committed belief. We will believe that there is a God who has given us his word and his word can be trusted. This doesn't mean that we cannot have doubts and questions, but it will mean that we will come to the Bible believing that God is alive and that he will speak to us through his word with the help of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we read the Bible with an element of trust and faith. There is, after all, plenty of trustworthy evidence for such a faith. The late D. L. Moody once said,

I prayed for faith, and thought that someday faith would come down and strike me like lightning. But faith did not seem to come. One day I read in the tenth chapter of Romans that "Faith comes by hearing – hearing by the word of God." I had closed my Bible and prayed for faith. I now open my Bible and study and faith has been growing ever since.

We can listen to the Bible being read. We can read the Bible for ourselves. We can study the Scriptures, meditate and memorize the Bible. All of these will cause our faith to grow.

Please review

There are four rules for a proper reading of the Bible

1. The writing in the Bible is clear.
2. The same literary principles apply to the Bible just as in all literature.
3. The rule of context must be employed.
4. The rule of faith in that we have ample proof and evidence in which to place our trust.

CONCLUSION

It is sad to think of how many Bible-believing Christians know so little about the Bible. The Bible is the word of God. The Bible is very much like the miracle of the manna that was given to the children of Israel in the wilderness. It is food too strange for those abiding today in "Egypt" who know only food for the flesh. But for those abiding in Christ, the word of God is food for the spirit. Let the exhortation from C.H. Mackintosh teach us.

If I sincerely desire to grow in the divine life – if I am earnestly breathing after an extension of God’s kingdom within, I shall, without doubt, seek continually that character of nourishment which is designed of God to promote my spiritual growth. This is plain. A man’s acts are always the truest index of his desires and purposes. Hence, if I find a professing Christian neglecting his Bible, yet finding abundance of time – yea, some of his choicest hours – for the newspaper, I can be at no loss to decide as to the true condition of his soul. I am sure he cannot be spiritual – cannot be feeding upon, living for, or witnessing to, Christ.³

REVIEW

1. What are some clear Scripture references that speak of the divine inspiration of the Bible?
2. Where does the Bible record Jesus’ own words regarding the authority of Scripture?
3. List a few good arguments to show that the Bible manuscripts were copied reliably.
4. What are the two main Old Testament tests for determining true teaching and true predictive prophecy?
5. How might you explain to someone the implications of biblical prophecy as it relates to proof of the divine inspiration of the Bible?
6. What are some of the references in the Bible telling us to check all teaching with Scripture?
7. What would you tell people who say that the Bible cannot be understood because there are so many ways to interpret it? In other words, what is meant by the literal approach to interpreting the Bible?

³ C.H. Mackintosh, *Notes on the Pentateuch* (Neptune: Loizeaux Brothers, 1972), 215.

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

1. What about all the errors and contradictions in the Bible?

Rather than errors or contradictions it might be more accurate to say that there are some *biblical difficulties*. This is not to dodge the issue, but to show that many of the so-called errors can be logically and fairly explained. Many times false assumptions are made which lead people to incorrect conclusions. For example, the Bible is not in error simply because an alternate description of an event is told by several authors. This is what takes place in the four gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. Unless these accounts specifically contradict one another there is no error. It is fairer to say that the accounts merely complement each other. We must be fair-minded and give the authors the benefit of the doubt.

There are apparent contradictions and apparent errors. However, when studied more closely, satisfactory answers can be found. There are many good reference books available that clearly and expertly deal with the problems of biblical difficulties. One such book is by Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask*, Victor Books, 1992. This book has a lengthy introduction that lists seventeen common mistakes people make in dealing with biblical difficulties. This is followed by examples from both the Old and New Testaments.

2. How was the Bible compiled?

The compilation of the Bible concerns the issue of canon. That is, the measuring rod (canon) by which some writings were declared to be on par with Scripture and other writings were rejected.

The most basic point that must be realized is that the Bible was written, compiled and preserved exclusively in the community of the people of the God: Israel. God's plan was to raise up (create) a people for himself. Through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God created a nation of people he could call his own. Scripture was given to Israel. God chose to reveal himself to the world through the people of Israel. They were the caretakers of God's holy word and the revelation of God to the rest of the world. The Apostle Paul made reference to Israel regarding this point:

4 Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. 5 Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ. Romans 9:4-5

Another factor to consider regarding the canon of Scripture is that the writings had to be from a recognized prophet of God. This has often been called the "prophetic principle." Only the prophets were given the authorization to say, "This is what the LORD says."

There is also the task of comparing what was written with what has been written and accepted previously. There could be no contradiction or error regarding what was previously revealed as truth about God. (See Deut. 13:1-4)

The Bible wasn't compiled and selected by an anonymous committee in some random, haphazard way. Israel was uniquely called to be the shepherds of God's word under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament was compiled under the watchful eye of the believing community using the same principles of canon used for the Old Testament.

3. Hasn't modern science disproved the Bible?

It is a mistake to read the Bible as if were a scientific manual. History is full of horror stories of the clash between science and the Bible. Galileo, himself a devout believer, tried to steer the controversy in his day toward common sense. This is a quote that is associated with him: "The Bible tells us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go." Many have been led into error by trying to force the Bible to speak to areas for which it was not intended.

The word "science" means "knowledge." To give value to a word making it an entity in and of itself is a mistake. Science is merely what we know. Many people would like to make a dichotomy between what we know and what is commonly called "faith." To them, it is as if faith and knowledge cannot mix. True biblical faith is backed by knowledge. To believe otherwise would force us to believe that there is no faith in the realm of science and no science (knowledge) in the realm of faith.

There will always be some mysteries in the Bible just as there will always be some mysteries in modern science. A lot of things in the sciences are taken by faith, but usually not without good evidence. The same is true with things pertaining to the Bible. Many things that have been previously unexplainable in both science and the Bible now have acceptable explanations.

4. Why does the Bible condone capital punishment for seemingly innocuous crimes?

There are three categories of laws in the Bible: civil, ceremonial and moral. The civil and ceremonial laws concerned a nation that was under the direct rule of God. Israel was a *theocracy*. Certain laws were put into place that were designed to reflect the holiness of God and his desire to keep his people separate and unpolluted from a pagan world. These two categories of laws are no longer in effect. They were for a certain specific time and place in history.

However, the moral laws of God are for all time and for all people. We must be aware that all mankind is still completely and absolutely accountable to God for his moral law.

The requirements of the [moral] law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness. Romans 2:15

We will look at this topic in more detail later in *The Christian Basics* on the chapter on salvation.

When we hear people impugning God for what they think is his harsh and arbitrary treatment of lawbreakers it would be good to take note of a couple of things. First, God has the sovereign right to make any kind of law he so desires. Second, check to see if the particular law in question comes from either the civil or ceremonial category that is no longer in effect today. Those laws were only for a specific time and for a specific people, but not so any longer.

More questions?

Go to **christianlifetools.org** with your questions. They will be answered ASAP.