



## SCRIPTURE - THE SPIRIT'S TOOL

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## STARTING OUT

If you were asking yourself, "why should I read the Bible?" and it leads you to want to read it, but you don't know how to go about it, that's okay. If the Bible is even a small part of what is claimed for it, this is no ordinary reading experience. But it needs to be begun in a simple way, to get good ground under your feet.

The first item on your list is to get yourself a good study bible. (You can't study the Bible without a Bible!) English-language translations abound, and you can get lost in an alphabet soup of initials -- NAB, KJV, NASV, TEV, CEV, JB, and so on. For most people, the best choices would be the **New**

**Revised Standard Version (NRSV)** and the **New International Version (NIV)**, because they're easily read yet not dumbed down, and both are available in many study editions.

There are still some who insist on the King James Version (KJV), the official English translation from over 500 years ago. Since I often read old forms of English from being an amateur Germanic-family linguist, it's an easy read for me. Yet, most of the time, I use the NRSV, because I usually read the Bible not to enjoy language games but to have my life transformed. (Spirithome.com's web page links use the NIV, as kindly provided by the Bible Gateway at Gospelcom.net.)

For those who want to dig into the Bible for the first time, a good study bible is a good friend. It has maps, concordances, cross-references, and basic blurbs on the cultures, religions, and powers of Biblical times. You can also turn to Bible paraphrases, which restate the writings for a clearer grasp of its meaning. The only one of those I can recommend is Eugene Peterson's The Message, because he's so good and so sound at it. His work will hit home to you after only a short reading, and will hit home even to those who have been reading the Bible all their lives.

The sacred page is not meant to be the end, but only the means toward the end, which is  
knowing God himself.  
**A. W. Tozer**

## About Studying

The next matter at hand is how to go about studying the Bible. I hope not like most of us did in high school, dreaming of who you were dating Saturday night, or of future glories, or of just lazing around. Each of us needs two basic arenas for Bible study.

The first is self-study -- spending time on your own prayerfully reading the Bible. It can be done book-by-book, or by theme, or based on a daily lectionary (an official selection of key passages). Self-study is intimate, you and the Spirit who speaks through the Bible's pages. It is here where it's said that the Bible reads you as much as you read it; you see yourself through divine eyes. When I studied the Bible as a young adult, I did it the same obsessive way I studied college course subjects, by totally immersing myself weekends at a time just on one subject, using books, library time, letters, phone calls, articles, praying and meditating and endlessly thinking. What I soon learned is that to really get a handle on what the Spirit is saying, I needed to be with people and get a life.

This leads us into study with others, face to face. Most often in church, at a house, or on campus. A good Bible study and fellowship group is like nothing else in teaching us about how to live the faith.

In studying, start where you are, not where you're "supposed to" be. Maybe you have a lot of doubts and questions. Maybe what keeps getting at you is something from a movie or a song, or what you already know or think you know about the Bible's stories, or a Proverb your grandmother taught you. As you get into it, you'll find that you remember more than you think, but not nearly enough. Start where you are, and journey from there one footstep at a time. You're not doing it to pass judgement on the Bible or the people in it or the people who believe what it says. Nor are you doing it to whip yourself for understanding so little of it -- join the club. You were invited into this by the Spirit of the One who made us all, so you belong there. There's no cause for shame, guilt, or fear, least of all in Bible study.

Remember that the purpose of reading the Bible is to live by it in the love of its Author. Otherwise, why bother? After a while, the Bible starts becoming your lens for seeing the world as it is, and for seeing

yourself. The objective is to get it so thoroughly into you that you normally think in its terms. In that way, the Spirit uses it to reshape you. And as that happens, the Bible becomes Scripture for you.

## How Can We Learn From Scripture?

As Christians see it, Scripture's purpose is to **lead us to love God and into the good news of Christ and His coming Kingdom**. It is all fulfilled in Him -- so says Scripture! This is where all interpretation starts and ends. But we're at neither the start nor the end. The pillar of fire is not before us, nor can we walk up to Jesus and ask him a question. We're in a different time and place and situation, and live in a life with endless complications that were not even dreamt of ere long ago. So we are left with the task of having to figure out what the Spirit is saying to us in Scripture. What is the Spirit up to? What is the creative Spirit creating, shaping, or teaching through Scripture? But we are not left alone; **God has sent the Spirit to guide us -- God wants us to know**. This much all Christians trust, and so we all start from there when we read the Bible.

From that point on, Christians use so many methods for interpreting Scripture that I won't even try to count them. (Even when you use no method, you're still using a method -- by which I mean that no interpretation comes out of thin air. There's a way which led to the interpretations.) I'll give you my own way; maybe as you read it, you might recognize what you do. My questions can start at any point along the way, but sooner or later must face up to all the other parts of the process.

The next principle is that **Scripture interprets Scripture** -- what the Spirit's telling us through Scripture is unlocked by, tested by, qualified by, and balanced by, the rest of Scripture. This does not force us to treat any part of Scripture as if it were without human failings or error; the only way people of today can really trust the truth of something like that is if they discover it for themselves. No part of Scripture is slighted or ignored -- but no part of Scripture stands on its own.

There's a current school of thought called 'the narrative method' which comes in here. The 'context' for all that is found in Scripture is its overall story line or 'narrative'. All parts of the story find their meaning within the course of the overall story. The method isn't without its problems. The story is much greater than the sum of its parts, but you can't really know the story without grasping its parts, especially when the story develops from real life. Each passage, even each word, must have its full due and not be dismissed, even when it seems to go against the narrative. That said, the 'narrative' methods focus on what's most important about Scripture. The rest of it may be good to know, helpful, and even God's blessing for you, but it is the overall story line that gives us the 'why' for each Bible passage's being there.

Another principle is to interpret Scripture **prayerfully and devotionally**. If you're not communicating with God about it, meditating on it, and doing the things which surrender more and more of your being to God, you won't hear the Spirit even if your mind comes to good factual conclusions on the matter at hand. (This is also why it is so important to fill worship services with Scripture. Scripture in worship helps keep our souls open and thankful to the God of the Scriptures.)

Next, **hear what others said and say today** about what a passage of Scripture means. Pay attention to :

1. 2000 years of faithful yet sinful Christians and 3000 years of Jews;
2. the circle of believers you have fellowship with in your day-to-day life, including your pastor;
3. the billion other Christians alive today;
4. non-Christians who have honestly grappled with the Bible passage or the subject matter at hand.

The Spirit may have led them to understandings you'd never have thought of. The Spirit worked through Scripture to build and shape the faith community and the people in it. That should tell us something about where the Spirit is taking us (and you) today.

Next, God gave you the ability to **think for yourself**. You can reason, figure things out, research, probe, and question. Use science, history, sociology, physics, and psychology. Use what you've learned over the years. The Spirit can work through your thinking. When Scripture has trained the mind, the Scripturally-shaped mind is then set free to understand Scripture.

Within someone who prepares themselves aright in the other ways above, **the Spirit can use their feelings, conscience, and intuitions to help guide them**. Gut instinct and powerful emotion are no more (or less) sinful than anything else about you. But they must be shaped and given boundaries through the other checks, or they will tyrannize you. Sometimes it seems like thoughts and feelings as opposing sources that fight against each other. But **there are ways they can work together**. For instance, allow the Spirit to use Scripture to help you (and those you study with) imagine that passage of Scripture being lived out in your world. Or, picture yourself in the events of Scripture, through the people who lived those events.

There are other things (**specialized gifts, extraordinary circumstances** and such), but they would come under these principles.

Within the above framework, humans are not exalted above Scripture, and no part of Scripture is simply ignored or interpreted away or rendered invalid. None of these steps are strictly 'natural'; **all** have a supra-natural agency, someone beyond nature -- the Spirit -- at work. The fallibility level rises as one goes down the list, but there's always the other principles to keep that in check. The wise Christian turns these into a set of habits and patterns, a work ethic that becomes a part of our normal day-to-day way of living and learning. The wise Christian community trains us in these patterns from cradle to grave, and commits itself to live by what the Spirit shows us through it. Learning the Bible is as complex as life itself; it contains libraries worth of gray areas and galleries full of multiple facets and sparkling colors.

No matter how you interpret Scripture, it's all a waste of time if you don't allow what you find there to penetrate your life. If God really is God, the One with full authority over us (or in churchspeak, our 'Lord'), then what God tells us is of the highest importance to us. And that means the Bible. It's not there for you to just know, but for you to **believe** and **live by**. Or as John put it near the end of his Gospel :

**"Jesus also did many other signs in the disciples' presence that are not written in this book. But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in believing, you may have life in his Name." (John 20:30-31).**

Our task as Bible readers is to surrender ourselves to the Spirit who speaks through it.

## Is It Meant For YOU?

Not everything that's said in Scripture was meant for everyone at all times. For instance, not everyone is called upon to sell all that they own and give it to the poor. Yet, that calling may well be what God wants from **you**, just as it was for Francis of Assisi and many others throughout the centuries. You're in a different situation than the young rich man Jesus commanded to do it; you have different possibilities and complications, and the stumbling blocks to your faith may be very different. Remember that there was a crowd present when Jesus challenged the young man; Jesus didn't directly give them the same challenge. But just as it's wrong to presume that it applies to you, it is also wrong to be sure that it doesn't. The Spirit may well be trying to tell you something. Use discernment to help you find out.

When a word doesn't directly apply to you, it still has an important message, and it's wise to come to grips with it. For instance, even if you aren't one of those who is called to give up all you have, the episode has a lesson which applies to us all : we cannot serve both God and wealth. We all have to struggle with how that works out in our lives. Just because the specific situation doesn't apply to you

doesn't make it any less Scripture. God is still saying *something* to you, and you ought to get to know what it is.

## WE ARE NOT ALONE.....

The Bible is very well suited for private study. But it is even better suited for study with others. It wasn't made to be used primarily in solitude. It is God's Word spoken to you, but it is also God's Word for all of those who believe in God. That's why it's good to bounce your thoughts from the Bible off of others, and hearing what others think, taking advantage of God's promise about being where two or three (or more) are gathered. Otherwise, we'd miss too much. Our blind spots, our prejudices, even our being mere limited beings can get in the way. Studying and sharing with others is a way we can discern what the Spirit is telling us, because the Spirit is telling them too, and they (or you) might be hearing the Spirit more clearly at the moment. Then, there's also the voices of thousands of years of other believers, Jewish and Christian, who have been doing what you're doing, thinking about it, and coming up with penetrating insight and moves of sheer genius. They're not stupid; God got through to many of them. When we study the Bible with feedback from other voices, we're being open to the voice of the Spirit. Or, *you* might be the voice the Spirit uses to speak to those others. You may not know which. So share it! Commit to your study group : "I will be there; I will ask questions; I will share what I have; I will listen."

## In A Rut

Sometimes a study group can get stuck in a rut. You all start thinking alike or quickly pass by subjects that you addressed in the past or came to a hasty conclusion about. Some ideas that can help :

- Hold a joint bible study with people of a different family in the faith. For example, Calvinists with Eastern Orthodox, Evangelicals with Catholics, Pentecostals with Lutherans, Southern Baptists with Mennonites, Free Church with Anglican or national church. Or whatever such mix you can set up. It can be for one session, one group dropping in on another, or it can be for however long it takes to go through a particular pre-chosen section of Scripture. It may get vigorous when you come across differences, but that's where the lessons are. Don't just listen -- fully share what you find in it. It's not meant to be a monologue. You may discover that you have a common bond in Christ.
- Take your study out of the expected places. Meet at a mall, on a commuter train, at a diner, a beach, a hilltop, a park, a student lounge, or chairs put out next to a street corner. Anywhere but a safe and comfortable church or home. Look around for a while and take it in, this time with an eye for what God is doing, and for what is opposing or ignoring God. The objective is to see rather than be seen. The Spirit can speak from the world around you to teach you about the Scripture you're studying. You may have to struggle to hear each other, but maybe that makes you listen harder.
- Right after reading the section of Scripture aloud, try setting aside five minutes or so for silent meditation -- just focusing on the passage, thinking, listening for God's leading, praying over it. Then, share with each other from what came to you during the silent time -- thoughts, feelings, perspectives.

- Many parts of Scripture (especially the Gospels) can be acted out as a play, with dialogue and actions. Each person present takes a different role. Before doing it, take a moment so that each can take a good look at their character and lines, and bring their imaginations into it. You may find that you get thoughts and feelings you missed before, because you were a step closer to living through it. It seems more real when you see it happening around you.

There are, of course, no guarantees. But the Spirit often rewards diligent acts of courage in the faith.

## Reading the Bible Prayerfully

Bible reading takes you out of your own era and into the sweep of history. And then, beyond even that! Beyond, into the time before time, to the beginning of all that is. Beyond, into the times yet to come when God's reconciliations will all have come to be.

Private, prayerful Bible reading is intimate and personal. It's like exploration - it takes daunt and derring-do to dare to do it right. Be fearless -- ask God to show you, through the text. Keep asking. The very act of telling God about it turns even your bitterest thoughts into a strange kind of prayer. God's seen much worse out of us. You won't be struck by lightning for having even thought of what you're thinking. The decision to entrust God with the matter turns the strongest doubt into an act of faith and the most stubborn question into a plea of faith.

Much of the Bible is actually made up of prayers. Many of the Psalms and sections of the histories and the Prophets are prayers. The New Testament letters contain short prayers, such as in Ephesians 3:14-21. The best-known prayer in Scripture is the one that Jesus taught (Matthew 6:9-13).

The Bible can also be the hub of your own prayers. No method is needed, but for some of us, a method may help us stay focused, disciplined, and open-hearted. One of the oldest is 'Lectio Divina' (divine reading), and it's geared toward helping us listen to the Spirit that speaks through Scripture. One form of it goes like this : first, quiet your mind down. If you find that hard to do, it often helps that you focus on taking slow, deep breaths. Once you're gotten some focus, begin softly speaking a chosen Bible passage. Then, read it again real slow, this time listening for a word or phrase that stirs you, speaking again and again until one stands out. Then stay with that word or phrase, and ask why the Spirit is stirring you with it. Take what you're thinking, feeling, and remembering, and offer it back to God in prayer. Then repeat the process. You'll be finished when you get a sense of peace about it. Or, you may finish with a sense of exhausted disturbance, in which you know you've poured it out for now, but you're still being stirred in a way that may only be resolved as the day goes on. (If so, keep going back to that word or phrase throughout the day, and see what it has to do with your life.) Most people who use some version of the Lectio find that at some time during it, the Spirit reveals something about living the faith.

A personal devotional discipline of Bible reading is the prime setting for the Spirit to speak through Scripture in a way that's addressed to you. God's promises, God's standards, God's way of doing things, all get focused down to you and how it is to affect your life. But we need to give ourselves the time in which this can happen, so don't rush.

One way to tie Bible reading to worship is to read the lectionary readings (the chosen Bible passages for the coming Sunday). It adds to the impact of the sermon and the worship service itself, and the sermon

and service act as a reality check on our own reflections.

Also, worship books, and many booklets available from teaching and radio ministries, provide daily Bible reading resources. These select specific Scriptures for the day, and usually share a thought or two about it. These daily reading lectionaries are a good way of pacing yourself, of doing the Bible readings as a steady discipline rather than a streaky, hot-or-cold thing.

Even though private Bible reading is personal, we ourselves are part of communities: the world, our nation, our neighborhood, our church body, our congregation. Most of the Bible was written to be read to communities, and even when it is intended personally it is about living in the community and done for its benefit (that's why it was made public). The Scripture is God's Word to the whole Body of Christ, not just to oneself. So there needs to be a communal dimension to devotional Bible study. Ask yourself: what does this mean for the way I see what goes on in the world around me? What does God bid me to do or not do? Keep the focus on how you are to take the Word, for you are responsible to God for your own response, not everyone else's.

## SCRIPTURE

### and the Spirit's Impact Through It

### IT HAS IMPACT, WITH INTEREST

It's often said in mainline Protestant churches that the Bible is only the Word of God when it is read with faith. I myself would not put it quite that way. It seems to me that there is something about the Bible that is the Spirit's own, in a way that nothing else is. Christians acknowledge this in saying that the Spirit inspired the actual writings and speeches (such as by the prophets, story-tellers and editors) that led to the writings. If so, much of the Spirit's greatness should have rubbed off on it. One way to see if it's so is to see if it bears a key mark of God's Word : **it does not come back empty**. Does the *Bible* meet this standard even in non-believers' hands? Yes. For all of this modern culture's disbelief and cynical bitterness, it's not at all rare to see the Bible's effect. Even in the hands on those who don't believe in Christ family life or inner transcendent longings, and whenever people speak of peace or justice or morality or character or vision, something of the Bible's words, meanings, ethics, and intents do in fact come through. Sometimes those doing it have no idea where it came from; sometimes they know full well and ignore or reject God but still learn from the truths God put into the Bible. It does not come back empty. There are other measures of the Bible's nature as God's Word too, and it measures up on all counts.

Christians learned to trust the writings of the Bible by way of experience, over generations, repeatedly seeing how it leads us to what's good and true. Yet we sometimes talk as if everybody knows this, as if we could go up to just anyone and say 'the Bible says "do this"', and they'll jump to attention and say, "yes, sir!". To be blunt : Most people who do not believe in Christ do not believe in the Bible. The Bible still has some limited degree of respect from almost everyone, but if they're not already committed to it by faith, odds are it'll do no good to try to convince them of anything solely (or even mainly) from the Bible. It's not an authority for them because they don't believe in the One who stands behind it. Christ's followers, however, learn how clueless we are about following Christ, and learn how it is *the Bible* that clues us in.

5) People often quote single verses of Scripture and insist "the Bible says." Is this a proper use of God's Holy Word?

- The words of Scripture speak to the Word which became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ. Scripture, therefore, must be read in the context of God's self-giving love (which we know in Jesus Christ). To read individual passages of Scripture outside the context of the Church's confession that Jesus is Lord is to misunderstand its purpose.

"Authority and the Church: A Working Document",  
**Confessing Christ**, January 1998 (from the UCC tradition)

## ..... GET TO THE POINT !

Even though all that is true, that's not why the Bible is here. The Bible was not written, gathered, and kept over the years just to be a bin for holding grand truths and stories with morals that have good effects. Though anyone can find in it (or be led by the Spirit to find in it) answers to many great mysteries, and even find from it the right questions to ask, the Bible is not a question book or an answer book. When the Bible is read without faith, it misses the whole point of the Bible. Sure, you might develop strength of character from its examples, pattern your life according to the moral values in it, and even impact the world with something it taught you. **But that's not why it's there.** The Bible was written with a very different purpose in mind : the Spirit uses it to *reveal the purpose, vision, and love of God*, and to start, shape, and deepen faith in Christ. The Spirit made it to show how Christ recreated our relationship with God. The Bible is great because of the Great One who stands behind it and that Great One's love for us, a love that came to us, suffered death, and overcame even death so that we might also overcome it. **The medium (of print or speech or Web) is not the message; the God who Reveals is the message**, and the medium is just the messenger. Even more, the message is that of a love letter, not that of a rap sheet or a facts list. And like with a love letter, it's not so much how it's said than Who says it and why.

## Read the Bible With ATTITUDE

The Bible screams to be read with faith. But it really matters **what** faith one has. Case in point : Saul of Tarsus. He had read the Hebrew Scriptures all his life long. He was even trained in the school of thought and practice which was slowly developing what would eventually become the Talmud. He thoroughly believed in God -- not just any god, but the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and of David -- and probably believed strongly enough to give up his life if need be (a very real possibility in Roman times). By all the standards of Scripture as revealed up to Jesus' time, he was following God as he should have. But those standards had been radically changed only a few years earlier, and God set about to break through all that Saul knew. God didn't use Scripture to make the breakthrough. There was no New Testament yet to bear the new Word, since people were still busy *living* the New Testament. So God created an experience that would open Saul up to the truth : Saul was blinded. When his blindness ended, he had new eyes for seeing what had already been revealed in a new light : a new Word. Saul was no longer Saul, but Paul. And Paul went on to live, and write, that new revelation, as the author of letters and as the foremost evangelist of all. The light that the Spirit shed through Paul's life and pen, in turn, now lights our way.

## BRACKET THIS !

God doesn't speak objectively or dispassionately. So, why should God's Word be studied objectively or

dispassionately? Only one reason is good enough : to better understand it so that our passions, our limitations, or our prejudices don't blind us. One way to think of it is this : when writing, a writer might use brackets [ ] or parentheses/colons ( ) to make an aside or take care of a side track or add a needed reference or make a corrective statement. It's good to 'bracket out' the passion of one's faith briefly, to get it out of the way of what the Spirit is really saying through the Bible passages you're studying. Brackets are useful, but only within the context of making the unbracketed whole easier to understand. When 'bracketing' in Bible study, the bracketed 'objective' look at the passage(s) is to be done within the context of a passionate faith in the Word outside of the brackets, for the sake of making that whole life of faith better and stronger. The more objective view may well include scholarly methods or measures, logical thinking, history, and measuring up the interpretations against other evidence. All sound methods soundly pursued are worthy of use, but they are to be done in brackets set within the whole picture.

## EUREKA!

(... so take a bath...)

The Spirit works hard within us to get us to grasp what God has done and is doing and will do. The moments when God's revelation hits home is sometimes described as a Hmm... or an Aha... moment. But Hmm... and Aha.... happen regularly to anyone whose brain isn't switched off. Sometimes, though, it's a lot more than that. Reformed writer **Gabriel Fackre** caught these moments better by calling it a 'eureka experience'. It's got WOW to it. It breaks through the smog of life. If we try to use a room fan to clear out a fog bank, it fails because it's too small; we ourselves can't cut through the smog. But the Spirit's got a hugely powerful light that burns its way right through it. It's a potent gift from God.

## BRICK BY BRICK

The Spirit rewards it when you keep plugging away at Bible study. You may not notice it, but you are being shaped and built up, brick by brick. What is unfamiliar turf at first eventually becomes familiar. One lesson builds upon another, and a vision starts taking shape. The big picture comes into view. Each time you go back to a passage of Scripture or read a Bible story again, you understand it better because of all that you've discovered since last time. And you can see more of how you are to live it out in the world around you. It takes a lifetime, and even then it's not complete, because the New World you're being rebuilt for is not complete. One day, it will be. But you'll have to trust that to the Spirit who's building it.

## Scripture and Discernment

Christians turn to the Bible in order to get our story right. The New Testament passes along the testimony of those who knew Jesus and His mission in person. For the early church after the apostles, for the Reformers, and for us today, we turn to Scripture because we know the Spirit speaks there. It is Scripture that shows us the Spirit's priorities, and Scripture that shares with us the vision of the coming Kingdom. The Spirit works through Scripture, not against it. Through Scripture, we discover wisdom and direction. Without it, we fail to distinguish **God's** Purposes and Word from **our** purposes and words. This is true of what we think and do today, and it's also true of the past, including the traditions we most treasure. If the new or the old stands against Scripture or is used to thwart its central thrusts, we must stand with Scripture, or we will fall for anything.

This 'Scripture principle' is not there to hold the Spirit in chains. It is to be used **in the light of freedom in Christ**, knowing that **Scripture does not directly address most matters**. Instead of demanding direct 'Scriptural warrant' for a practice or course of action, it's better to seek these :

1. that Scripture does not speak against it;
2. that the practice or teaching conveys the Gospel, and is fully in keeping with the root and heart of Christian belief found in Scripture;
3. that it turns the focus onto **Christ**, not persons, ideas, ideologies, organizations, wondrous signs, or activities;
4. that it is truthful, not rooted in a lie or distortion.

If these are all true, then no direct warrant is needed from Scripture, tradition, or for that matter, sometimes even from common sense. The Spirit has every right to lead us into new things that look like folly. The Holy Spirit is sovereign. Discernment is our finding out if it's the Holy Spirit and not someone else's folly.

There are some people who could stuff themselves with Scripture until it came out their noses, and they'd still refuse to let the Spirit teach them anything. They're seeking support, not truth. For the rest of us, the patient, prayerful, steady study of Scripture brings many rewards. The Spirit rewards such diligent listening by developing within us an understanding of why God acted in the past. Since the same God is acting today toward the same purposes, this gives us a sense of what God is doing now and what role we may have in it.

The Scripture principle is not a substitute for the Spirit. It works only because the Spirit works through Scripture. We rely on that truth when we read the Scriptures in earnest prayer. Without the Spirit's action, the Bible's pages would lay still, moving your life no more than a dictionary or encyclopedia. If the Spirit is working in us, the Bible is aflame with truth and vision for every corner of our lives and for the whole world we live in. The Spirit wants us to study, to trust, and to shape our lives according to what is in Scripture; to steep it into our souls, to live by the contours and the world vision of the Scriptures. No one can prove that the Bible is the authentic story of God's dealings with humanity. That has to be shown to each of us by the Holy Spirit.

We cannot just nakedly 'go by the fruit' or what comes from what we do/think/are, because **it is Scripture which shows us what fruit we are to look for**, and in what contexts they are the work of the Spirit.

Scripture shapes an authentic Spirit-led experience, and sets the bounds for it. When we're looking for the course and purposes of what God is doing, Scripture ranks first.

## **The Story : Fiction or Truth?**

The great religions have great stories. Great stories tell great truths which help us deal with life. And we love to tell the story. But Christianity (like Islam and Judaism) is not about the great stories themselves. It is about the real-life main character behind the stories, a real-life One whom you can come to know through that story. That same real-life being is the One who made the great Truths true and Reality real. Today's thinking presumes the opposite : the story is what counts, and the primary character can be no more real than Captain Picard or Homer Simpson. That's the premise behind virtual reality : the new technology lets you become your own story-teller (with the help of your software-deity, of course). Sounds good, except that you're not the author of reality, just a writer of fiction. God will not be relegated to the same level as Hercules (who never crushed a real army) or Pecos Bill (who didn't dig the Rio Grande) or Jessica Fletcher (who never solved a single real murder case or for that matter never wrote an actual novel about solving murder cases). God is the real author and the main character, and

God wrote us. I don't really have much of a choice about trusting God with the story line, since the other choices are figments of far lesser authors.

You might have read some articles that refer to "narrative" and "metanarrative". "Narrative" refers to the stories as they are told. Through stories, events and/or facts take on a context, and thus meaning. You can think of "metanarrative" as a story line that give a central meaning and impact to many meaningful stories - it holds them all together. The Bible has a metanarrative running through it, about God rescuing creation from the horrible results of its wandering ways. It is a story of love and betrayal, and of the ultimate sacrifice. But the Bible's metanarrative isn't owned by the Bible. It is the Bible's story line because it is life's central story line -- **all** of our lives, whether or not we are aware of it, whether or not we hate it or love it with a passion, or don't care at all. You are in it, every day in every way, just by being. That's why the Bible's story line is so utterly inescapably important. It is where the much-fabled "meaning of life" is found -- the meaning of your life, and of all life.

One reader asked us if "all metanarratives are just a well-disguised power game -- a mere useful explanation, not the real cause of what happens?" As much as you live by the Christian metanarrative, you live in a way that specifically renounces, rejects, and **proposes an alternative to**, power games. The power gamblers will try to use anything for power games, and faith is no different. But there is a real Someone causing this metanarrative. That Someone doesn't take well to manipulative humans; God can, and does, bite back. In the power game, God ultimately holds the winning hand, which means that if you're playing against him, you don't.



## WORDS ABOUT THE WORD

### Descriptive definitions of words Christians use when describing the Bible and what it does

**Authentic** : **The Bible is what it claims to be**, and is not an imitation or con job. It really **is** from God, and really **is** what God reveals to us about us, about our world, and about God. There are some well-publicized forums where they vote on what they believe is and isn't really historical or is and isn't really said by Jesus or the disciples. Their conclusions have at times been helpful in stripping away some of the illusions that have been shielded by Christian tradition. Yet, they seem bent on trying to create a new image of what Jesus was, and that image has a surreal feel to it. A sense develops that their 'historical Jesus' is a fascinating guy but not someone I'd be inspired to follow, much less die for. Yet the hard and unavoidable fact is that this is exactly what people were inspired to do. The New Testament conveys an inspirational Jesus, an authority Jesus, a Spirit-empowered Jesus, a Jesus who would inspire what we know happened thereafter. An **authentic** Jesus. And it says this Jesus did the one thing most ultimately worth doing, setting us back aright with the Father who loves us. It would take something that big, that real, to be worth more than a passing glance 2000 years later.

**Authority** : **Who/what we turn to in order to settle questions**. The Bible is held by most churches to be the sole authority for most matters of faith and Christian living. Christians can argue, but they turn to the Authority to make their case. Christians in developed countries are becoming ever more restless with the idea of an 'authority'. They fear any 'authority over' them. But the Bible is firstly an 'authority to' or 'for'; it has a purpose for which it and it alone is well suited. Also, there **is** One who is 'authority over' us (unless we are stupid enough to think of ourselves as little gods), and this One communicates to us through the Bible. The Bible is authoritative because of the One who stands behind it.

There are many terms used for saying what the Bible has authority for. The most common words that describe what's been meant by that over the years are :

- **life** (that is, how we live day to day in the world)
- **doctrine** (that is, what Christians teach each other about the faith)
- **practice** (that is, what Christians do as acts of faith : worship, devotions, prayer, and anything else we do when we gather or act specifically in Jesus' name)
- **theology** (that is, the way we think and talk about God)

**Autographs** : The **original written parchments/slabs/papyri** that the Biblical authors used when first authoring the Biblical books. This is supposedly the 'most purely inspired' -- and thus most 'infallible' -- form of the Biblical books. These are long since all gone, and were in fact all gone within several generations of being written. Thus, reference to them in defending a text is an act of fiction. What we have now is all we ever will have : a set of written works whose oldest existing copies are many generations of copying from being original. It is these Nth generation copies, with all their occasional scribal errors and expansions, that are translated into the written materials that the Spirit speaks through today. If we found 'autographs', that would be wonderful, but we haven't and probably won't. The Spirit works through our copies, and our copyists' errors.

**biblical** (also '**Bible-based**') : 'according to the Scriptures'. The phrase has had its meaning watered down so much that it describes anything from snake-handlers to end-time cultists to the seminary teachers that boost the 'new morality'. For most Christians, 'biblical' means that the substance and the shape of Christian faith and life is to be drawn from the main course of what the Bible says.

**Canon** : Greek for 'measuring rod'. In our times, the term usually refers to the books of the Bible. The list of measuring stick books are different with different believers : the Catholics and Orthodox have additional First Covenant (OT) books. Jews have several 'layers' of their Scriptural tradition : the five books of Moses come first, then the prophets, the histories, and the writings (such as Job, Psalms and Proverbs). There are also measuring sticks that aren't part of a formal canon. The Talmud is not a 'canon', but a resource of continuous discussion of matters of living the life of Jewish faith; even so, the Mishnah has some measuring-stick effects. For credal Christians, the ecumenical creeds have some measuring-stick uses, but the use is derivative; the creeds are norms only by being a short version of the key truths taught by the canonical Scriptures. When you hear things about what Scripture says about Scripture, remember that the Scriptures Jesus and Paul referred to are "the law and the prophets", not the Gospels or Paul's letters, or even the writings (though by their time, Psalms and Proverbs were treated as canon by nearly all Jews). To Moslems, the canon is the Qur'an as given to Mohammed, without other books or measuring rods of authority. But they do have teachers who often, depending on the sect, wield a great deal of authority over what is seen to be what the Qur'an means.

**Decisive** : When something is called the "decisive" factor, it means that it is **what causes things to be the way they become**; it sets the path, tips the scales. When someone is a "decisive" leader, that person is someone who leads without blind impulse but also without waffling. Such a leader is focused, direct, and purposeful; any differing thoughts in that leader's mind are harnessed to make the decision wiser, better, clearer and fuller. And so it is with the Bible. When we are waffling as to how to live our lives, or even in knowing what a Godly life is, Scripture is decisive. It shows the way to go; it is what is given to us by God to set our path and tip our scales. And we bypass it only at great spiritual cost.

**Effective** : The Bible **succeeds in doing what it is created to do**. Through the Spirit's work, it shows God, God's vision, God's purposes, and God's good news to us. Our collective openness to the Bible seems to be shrinking, but **the Spirit is still using it** to pry us open to God. A related word with much the same meaning is **efficacious**.

**Eisegesis** : This is what's being done **when someone interprets Scripture according to notions that were born outside of Scripture**. It's when we read stuff into Scripture. (For instance, the idea of the United States as a "Christian Nation" is the creation of egos who gloat over being powerful. It has no basis in history or fact, but more important, it has no basis in the Bible. Yet some leading politicians and pastors interpret the Bible through this notion.) To some extent, eisegesis is unavoidable : we don't come to the Bible with a blank slate, a lot of living and learning went into each of us. If we really bring our whole selves to the study of Scripture, all that stuff in us **will** and **should** have an impact on how we learn from Scripture. Here's where prayerful obedience and discipline come in, for the Spirit rewards hard work and harder prayer. The hard work uncovers what Scripture is telling us, and in obedience we set aside the ideas we cherish so that we may take on Scripture's vision. The same living and learning that would have made us do an eisegesis of the text instead becomes the crucial data for re-visioning our lives and thoughts (hermeneutics) in the light of what the Spirit reveals in Scripture (exegesis).

**Exegesis** : In its simplest meaning, it means **finding out what the Spirit originally said in the passage of Scripture through its author**. It's what comes out of Scripture, as against what gets read into it. (Of course, the ways we use to find out from Scripture are often merely ways to put something into it 'between the lines'. That's really eisegesis in a Halloween costume.) In a more theological setting, exegesis means what comes from the use of certain methods of studying the Bible. Just about every imaginable method already has a name, but the main ones are :

- **historical** (using the word choices, editing work, historical context, main themes, and so on, to find what it meant back when it was written or when it happened),
- **canonical** (treating Scripture as an whole document designed to be what a specific community lives by),
- **symbolic/allegorical** (figuring out what each character and event represents),
- **rational** (thinking it through using logic and deductive technique).

Most Bible students use most of the methods in their own way at some time, even if they don't think they do. All of them are often helpful, sometimes not at all helpful, and occasionally downright deceptive. It's best to see all methods as tools for the Bible student to use prayerfully, rather than as rules to follow or conclusions ('scholarly consensus') that one must accept. There are many angles and facets to most passages of Scripture, and the different methods help you get at them.

If you aren't doing some kind of exegesis, you are not finding out what the writings themselves are saying. But what good is knowing eternal truth if it doesn't matter to you? Thus, exegesis is just one important step in studying the Bible; there also needs to be hermeneutics (see below).

"Exegesis...is an act of love. It means loving the one who speaks the words enough to want to get the words right. It is respecting the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully."

-- **Eugene Peterson**, in *\*Theology Today\**, April 1999, p.10

**Essential** : **the one source you cannot do the task without.** Because there are no other reliable sources to tell us about Jesus, His ministry, and the start of the Christian church, the New Testament is to be seen as the essential record. The First Covenant (Old Testament) is essential, too, since Jesus came to fulfill it.

**Gospel, the** : The **core message of the Bible**, that **God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.** There are many other things in the Bible, great and wonderful, but they all exist to create and further this reconciliation with God, by God's grace through faith.

**Hermeneutics** is about **the ways you discover meaning in the Bible for your life and your era**, faithfully taking the original intent into today's world. Scripture is not meant to be a lazy read; when you read it, you use ways to figure out what it means and how to live it. There's a science and art to that : hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a kind of discernment process.

There's a lot of talk lately about "**hermeneutic distance**", namely, the fact that as times change, so does the setting for Scripture's messages. Our era is not the same as Jesus', or even your father's. It's a hot topic now because so much is changing so fast. Most churches make too little of this, as if unchangingness is what counts, when in fact change counts, and no learning or growth happens without change. Non-believers and 'liberal-church' believers make too much of it, as if the more things change the less they stay the same, when in fact most of the core things of life change little, and mostly in form rather than substance. Each era develops its own fresh set of likenesses to the era of Jesus.

**Human authors** : Christians hold that the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, but that the Spirit worked through human authors, poets, prophets, editors, collectors, and such. The human character of the authors comes through in the various parts of the Bible. Because the Spirit inspires, the Scriptures will tell you all the truths you need to follow God. Because the authors are humans, there are culturally-conditioned ways of expressing things, there are signs of the writers' own character and vision, and there are different styles and use of words. The Bible's humanness is part of its usefulness and appeal over thousands of years. Whether it's Jeremiah's sense of terror all around, or Nehemiah's testimony of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, or the Psalmists' anger and fear, or Paul describing his relationship with the other apostles, the personal, human part of the writing of the Bible helps draw us in. The Scriptures tell us that the way God usually works is through humans. God even chose to become a human for us, as Jesus. In a different way, the Spirit inspires each of use and reveals to us what Christ wants us to know (John 16:12-15).

This is unlike the Muslims, nearly all of whom treat the Qur'an as being written by God in heaven in Arabic and then given as is to Mohammed, instead of being written through the creative abilities of inspired people. The Mormons hold that the Book of Mormon was 'discovered' by Joseph Smith, but at least in their case there was the need to translate it.

**Indelible** : Scripture seeps through despite our attempts to white it out or paint it over. It **leaves its mark** on us, somehow, in some way. The Spirit keeps calling to us through the Bible, telling us of God's love and grace. God's word **will** be heard, and it **will** have an impact.

**Inerrant** : In its best sense that's most in line with Christian tradition, it means that **the Scriptures are always right (do not err) in fulfilling their purpose** : revealing God, God's vision, God's purposes, and God's good news to us -- the stuff that's usually meant by the term "Word of God". The teachings of Scripture are not to be disregarded or tossed away as if they were a mistake. They must be dealt with straightforwardly, in a way that affects what we say and do as persons and as a body of believers.

Some Christians ('**fundamentalists**' or 'literalists') teach that the Scripture is without error in every way on all sorts of matters : chronology, history, biology, sociology, psychology, politics, physics, math, art, and so on. There can't be any mistakes in a divine work, fundamentalists say, for God is perfect and cannot lie (Titus 1:2). This idea is very ancient, even if the word 'inerrant' wasn't how they described it until the past two centuries. Though the literally-taken Bible is often more right than most scientists think it is, it is quite far from being an *inerrant* authority on such matters. It wasn't written to be that kind of an authority, that's not why it's there. It's a divine work, true, but it does not claim to be inerrantly dictated from on high, as Muslims say happened with the Qur'an. The books of the Bible were written by divinely-inspired human beings for the good of other human beings. The Bible itself shows how the inerrant Spirit works through errant people, for that's the only kind of people there are. God's communication is sent by way of the stuff of material earth -- pages and ink, literary forms, languages, and spoken words. This combination gives us a Bible that can be mistaken on matters that are not directly tied into what the Bible exists for. Because of the literalist misunderstanding of the Bible, '**mainline Protestants**' (such as the Methodists, American Baptists, United Church, Anglicans, most Presbyterians, and most Lutherans) choose to reject the term. Perhaps they've overreacted, but it helps to set the record straight.

**Evangelicals** show a better understanding of the term in the Lausanne Covenant, which holds Scripture to be "**without error in all that it affirms**" (Sect. 2, The Authority And Power Of the Bible). This is the approach of the 'new breed' Pentecostal churches and those in Africa; it's much like the view of the Lutherans in Australia and the Missouri Synod, the European Inner Missions, and (in practice) most of the 'church growth'-oriented community churches. However, these churches feel fundamentalism pulling them toward a larger realm for inerrancy. The term 'inerrant' is foreign to **Roman Catholic** and **Eastern Orthodox** traditions, even though the idea behind it is present in some parts of their traditions.

**Infallible** : This means that **when the Scripture is speaking the Good News of Christ and describing the character, vision and purpose of God, through the Holy Spirit's work it transcends the spiritual flaws of its writers, of the media of communication (such as print or preaching), and of the readers/hearers.**

The Bible's Gospel message of God's love and forgiveness is not 'fallen' or corrupted by sin. The Bible becomes the way we find out that the 'fallen' human race is being restored and made worthwhile again through Christ. **Fundamentalists** overplay the term, saying that the Bible is infallible on every matter it covers, in just about all its uses. **Mainline Protestants** choose not to use the term 'infallible'. Some of them (especially among US Presbyterians and the United Church of Christ, and most of those in the **Westar** bible-critical project) believe that there is *nothing* in the Bible that escapes earthly corruption, so even each aspect of its Gospel message (such as the New Testament's answer on the cosmic role of Jesus of Nazareth) must pass the bar of human reason. This sounds fine to those who rate open-mindedness and reasoning above all else like they were infallible gods, but the Scriptural message rather clearly says that some matters are simply too important and too true to waffle about. We are no more (and no less) infallible than the Bible writers and readers of the past. The Spirit inspired the writers so that they would get these matters right no matter what other ideas or motives were floating through their minds. Why bother with the Bible if you're not listening to what it says? And when you feel you can just discount its core themes and the narrative that carries them, can you really be listening at all?

**Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and many Lutherans and Anglicans** are not willing to call any part of the Good News 'fallen', and hold to some limited form of infallibility. **Roman Catholics** can speak of the 'infallibility' of the Bible, but only within the framework of the historic Roman Church tradition and the God-guarded teaching role of the Roman Church leadership ('magisterium'). The **Eastern Orthodox** don't think in any of these terms, seeing Scripture and churchly tradition as one flowing stream in which the Gospel message remains truthfully conveyed through the work of the Spirit (a sort of limited 'infallibility', but without a 'magisterium' as its master).

**inherent** : [from the Latin, *in-* (in) + *haerere* (to stick)] **that which makes something what it is**, without which it would be something else altogether. It's said of any essential ingredient, part, or characteristic of something which can't be pulled apart or un-stuck from it, but is not all of what it is. Another word like this would be "**intrinsic**". This word expresses the idea that the Word of God (see listing under "Word") is not all the Bible is, but is essential to it, since bearing that Word is the reason the Bible exists. Read it or hear it, and you are getting the Word, expressed in song and history, parable and poetry, prophecy and law.

I first heard the term from Martin Marty in an interview for my Morning Star radio program in 1990. It is used foremostly by theologian Walter Brueggemann, in the book *\*Struggling With Scripture\** in 2002 and many years before that. Brian McLaren in *\*The Last Word and the Word After That\**, p.111, also uses it. They use it to rightly distinguish "the Word" (God's message to us) from "the Bible" (the means by which the Word comes), and then rightly *reconnect* them. But lately the term's being bandied about by mainstream pastors and speakers in order to beat back conservative and evangelical views of the Bible, instead of coming to grips with the important truths in what their conservative brethren bring them.



**Inspired and Inspiration** : **The Holy Spirit is who made the Bible possible, and who makes it work.** The Spirit inspired its writing; the Spirit inspired its interpretation over the years; the Spirit inspires us today when we read it with the eyes of faith, or hear it spoken or interpreted aloud, or see it truthfully portrayed. **The Spirit fills the whole process**, from ancient event to you. One term for the Bible's inspiration is Greek *theopneustia*, "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Two other words are sometimes used for describing how the Bible is inspired. '**Verbal**' inspiration means that each word of the Bible is fully inspired by the Spirit. Most mainline Protestants hedge slightly on this word, that not everything is equally inspired. Some of them even believe that some of the Bible is not inspired at all; however, most experienced Bible readers understand that humanity's darker sides, even those of the Biblical authors themselves, have key lessons to teach us from the Spirit. The other word is '**Plenary**' inspiration. It means that the Bible as a whole is specially inspired. Without using the term itself, Luther strongly linked that kind of inspiration to the word that convicts our hearts of wrong (Law), and the message of Christ and of the salvation Christ gives us (Gospel). I think it's better not to use either 'verbal' or 'plenary', because most people don't know what they mean. Instead, say their most helpful meanings in another, more understandable way.

**Instructional and Instructive** : **It teaches us what God most wants us to know.** The Bible has two key things to say this : Matthew 22:29 and 2 Timothy 3:16. In the Matthew verse, Jesus tells us that if we come to understand Scripture, we will not spend our time on working out the technical details as these Sadducees did, but will instead focus on what God is revealing in it, in this case, that there is a

resurrection, and that resurrecting and restoring is the way God does things. Timothy is being told that through the Scriptures he has known from childhood, he has been given the tools he needs for the task he's about to be given in Chapter 4. Timothy is told that Scripture's really good at such teaching and training. "Reproof" and "correction" refers to the work of Scripture as 'norm' (see below). "Teaching" and "training in righteousness" refer to the work of Scripture in "instruction", so that the believer can tell the difference between the insight given by God and the stuff that tickles the ear (2 Tim 4:3).

**literal** : One of the most misused words about the Bible. The word 'literal' means '**what the words say**', or 'letter by letter'. Yet the same exact word with the same exact spelling says different things in different settings around different other words using different literary forms. (For instance, 'love' means one thing in Jesus' command to love, and a very different thing in a steamy sex poem, and still another when a child talks about a pet puppy.) A literalist believes that every word of the Bible is not just a part of the divine creative Message (Greek *logos*), but is also a specific word from God. Yet the human writers of the Bible were inspired by the Spirit to tell stories and histories, write poems and songs, and share visions with their readers. It is *literature*. And that is the context in which you find out each word's true literal meaning.

What many people mean when they say 'literal' is '*face-value*' or 'in the *strictest / narrowest* sense'. But the Bible's writers, like most writers everywhere, don't just operate at face value. How can anyone who believes in the unseen spiritual realm be satisfied with just face value? Spirituality is about what lies beneath the surface, a realm of complex simplicity. There is another side to it, though : it is never wise to simply disregard the face value meaning, for it is what the fuller meaning of the word is built on. A word will always start from its face value, but rarely stays there.

A site user emailed me this :

> Another problem I have is my continued doubt about the inerrancy  
> of the Bible and the need for literal interpretation of the  
> Bible (particularly the account of creation and the rejection  
> of science by many denominations).<

I try not to use terms like 'inerrant' or 'infallible', because the church of today uses them for dividing people instead of helping them embrace truth. It's best to look to the Bible for faith and faithful living rather than science. It tells facts, yes, but it tells them in order to tell the **truth**. You can read these pages if you want more on that; you may not agree with all of it, but that's fine - you are to believe Scripture, not a web site.

The Bible is a completely, totally *biased* resource -- that's what makes it so good. The prophets, priests, story-tellers, and apostles who wrote the Bible wrote it not as a neutral observation of fact or history, but as an account of God's work by His most enthusiastic, passionate, committed, monomaniacally partisan supporters. They want you to lay your life into God's hands; they want you to believe the Gospel, follow Christ, love your neighbor, and trust the Spirit. They want that because they discovered for themselves that nothing else matters (or better, all else matters *because* these things matter). That's why they wrote! The Spirit enabled them to see through the events of their day to get at the grand purposes behind them. Those grand purposes still underlie the events of our day. Most of us are too busy being obsessed partisans of our selves to see God's purposes. The Bible takes us out of that. Trust the Spirit who's using the Bible, rather than the words people invent to describe the Bible.

**narrative** : [Lat. *narrâre* (to tell a story), originally from some form of hypoth. Indo-European \*gnô- (to know)]. In a 'narrative method' of looking at Scripture, **the context, roots, and importance of what's found in Scripture is found in its story line**. All parts of the story find their meaning within the course of this narrative. The method isn't without its problems. For one : the story is much greater than the sum

of its parts, but you can't really know the story without grasping its parts, especially when the story develops from real life. Each passage must have its full due, even when it seems to go against the flow, even if it does go against the flow (it may show us a paradox). That said, 'narrative' approaches focus on what's most important about Scripture, the story line. For a Christian, the 'story line' of God's work among human beings is the good news of Jesus Christ and through Him, the reconciliation of all that exists with its Maker. The rest of it may be good to know, helpful, and even God's blessing for you, but it is this story line that is the 'why' for the Bible and each passage in it.

**Norm** : A 'norm' is **something by which other things are measured and judged**. When the Bible is called the 'norm', it means that **what we think, teach, and do must measure up** to the standards of Scripture. This stops us from getting carried away with ourselves. Many traditions speak of the 'norming norm' or 'norm within the norm' or 'material norm' : the Gospel message of God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ. That means that all the rest of the Bible is measured according to Christ and the Gospel message. The Bible is the 'norm' because of who stands behind it and whose story it tells. This puts the main focus where it belongs -- Christ, not Moses or David or Paul or John, or even the Bible.

In everyday talk, the term 'normal' doesn't mean 'according to the measure'; it means 'average', 'typical', 'usual', 'everyday', and 'common'....(yawn).... The Bible is decidedly not 'normal' in this sense; it is quite unique and unusual. What it tells us is in some ways very different that what we take in from our 'normal' world. The world and the Bible operate under different norms.

**Only** : **alone in its purpose; sole**. It's usually used with words like 'norm', 'rule', and 'source', often in the form of the Latin '**sola**'. 'Sola' is most often used by Lutherans, who got addicted to the word by using it with 'grace' and 'faith'. When 'only' is used about Scripture, it means that no other documents, sources, resources, and such, and no leaders individually or collectively, can act to define the way Christians have faith (**belief**), think and speak about God (**theology**), teach Christian beliefs (**doctrine**), act together as believers (**practice**), honor and praise God (**worship**), develop a relationship with God (**devotion**), and carry out their daily activities and relationships within an unbelieving world (**life**). **Only the Bible fills that role**. "Only" is the kind of word that grates against the ear of today's people -- we hate exclusive claims. But the truth is that **no other source gets the job done**. This is the source that the Spirit has chosen to use for that purpose. Period.

**perspicuous**. (From the Latin, *per-* (through) + *specere* (to look, view); related to Eng. "perspective".) **Clearly and directly communicated or presented**; lucid. When used about the Bible, it means that it doesn't take any specialized training to get what the Bible (or most any part of it) is trying to tell you. This is not a license to be ignorant. You are still called on to take the time and effort to work it through, but there's no required method for that. True, there are some mysteries, but these confound even the wisest. The unschooled and the retarded have often shown a solid grasp of the main thrusts of Scripture. That's because **the Spirit wants us to know such things**. The Spirit is the one who reveals it to us, and the Spirit can work through an awareness, a happening, a life experience, a method of study, or anything else to make clear to us what is being revealed through Scripture. Idiots and geniuses alike can be fools and jerks about Scriptural matters, but they and everyone in between have what it takes to grasp the message. Another term for this is **clarity**.

**Primacy or Primary Authority**: This means that **the Scriptures rank first**. They are the home base from which all other matters of life and spirituality travel out. They rank over the other writings of the Jewish and early Christian faiths (even such hallowed works as the Didache or the Mishnah). Over

tradition as a whole. Over your spiritual experiences, and over anyone else's. Over moral codes, canon law, or administrative rules. Over what you think can or must be done in the current situation of your life. Over what you or everyone else thinks is necessary for their current times or for the future or even for what you think is needed for human survival. Over your conscience (indeed, they are what is to be used for training your conscience). Over theologies, psychologies, sociologies, and ideologies. Over culture and trends. Over mystic dreams, insights, tongues, miracles, and prophecies. Over celebrities, saints, popes, councils, presidents, synods, and assemblies. Scripture stands as **the ultimate corrective** -- the Spirit uses it to tell us when and how we are going astray, what is *really* needed, what God wills, and how we are to do it.

**Reveal** : There are matters we could only have any knowledge or understanding about if God told us. For instance, how could we really understand anything about God -- character, will, plan, being -- if God didn't show it to us? We lack the needed 'omniscience' to figure it out ourselves (that is, we don't even come close to knowing enough to do it). We'd be left with natural vague hints and intelligent wild guesses. We'd be on somewhat better ground about ourselves, but even there, we still can't seem to figure out for ourselves why we are unable to straighten ourselves out, and why it is that the better we become at doing things, the better we also become in ever-deeper evils (such as H-bombs, monopolism, mind manipulation, and ethnic cleansing). Learning about such things takes '**revelation**' : **the One who knows shares that knowledge with us**. That's what the Bible is : God sharing these truths with us. That's what the prophets and apostles did. Most centrally, it is not just what Christ **did**, but what Christ **is**. Through the writings about all this, the Holy Spirit shows us that God's already done God's part in restoring our relationship with God. The Spirit then goes on to show us so much more -- about what God has given us, how God wants us to live and to treat each other, about love and fellowship and family and justice, about deepening that relationship with God, and about the time to end all time when the healing will be completed and all will be revealed. The Spirit lifts the veil (2 Corinthians 3:12-18), and thus frees us.

Christians are very unlike Muslims on this matter; to a mainstream Muslim, the Qur'an reveals God's will and message, but not God Himself - not character, not depth of love, nothing about His nature. Hence in Islam, Mohammed is the *messenger* of God, not the revealer of His character.

God's not trying to keep any secrets. God's just looking for someone who will listen.

**rule** : [from Latin *régula* (ruler, straight stick) and *regere* (to lead directly, to govern); both from assumed Indo-European root *reg-* (rod, something stretched straight)] **direction(s) for behavior or actions; a boundary within which an activity is conducted**. When Christians call the Bible the "rule", they're saying that even in a world of far-ranging choices, they will live the way that God marks out for faithful people in the Bible, and especially what Jesus calls for in the Gospels. The most important thing is to follow Christ and please God, and the Bible is how God tells us what that means. That same way of living and thinking is what gives the character, content, and direction of how Christians think about God and about how God relates to people.

the "**Scripture interprets Scripture**" approach : Through this approach, **what the Spirit is trying to tell us through Scripture is unlocked by, tested by, qualified by, and balanced by, the whole of Scripture**, rather than some other source outside of it. No part of the Bible is slighted or ignored -- but no part of the Bible stands on its own, apart from the meaning of the whole and apart from other specific parts which deal with related matters. Since the Bible is the way the Spirit reaches us, the rest of the Bible is the most reliable resource for finding what the Spirit is saying in any one section of the Bible. This often forces us to accept some amount of vagueness and paradox, since both are found all over Scripture and

cannot be wished away. Some (especially fundamentalists) hold that only Scripture interprets Scripture; however, that's not how the people in Scripture used earlier Scripture, and that doesn't help us learn how to live by it today. Narrative methods are a modern reflection of this approach.

**Source: where it comes from.** The Bible is the source of the Christian way of thinking, the Christian view of the world, the Christian way of life, and the Christian teachings and beliefs. US liberal Christianity challenges this description, by saying that it is better to draw their way of life from the world around them and be open to seeing the world in ways very different from (even opposed to) what is found in the Bible. They hold that the Bible is 'a' source rather than 'the' source. This has been said before in Christian history. Those who hold this view, then and now, gradually become less and less recognizable as Christians. **When you draw from the Bible, the Bible sends your focus back onto God.** The Bible is the only reasonably accurate report of Jesus and the early Church. It is the only place you can find what those who lived with Jesus discovered about Him. Thus, it is the only source for finding out what makes a Christian a Christian. The more a person draws from somewhere else, the more they become something else.

**Standard : something that is used for measuring, or for evaluating how good other things are.** A standard is chosen because its quality is already known and highly esteemed. The Bible's quality has been established by thousands of years of use, and by its ability to surprise us and prompt us to change even today. As with the other terms about the Bible's quality level, its being a 'standard' comes not so much by the work itself, or by the church leaders who first called it the standard, but by the One who stands behind it. Other terms for this include **'benchmark'**, **'yardstick'**, **'norm'**, and **'touchstone'**.

**Sufficient : enough.** When said about the Bible, it refers to the belief that **what is found in the Bible is all that is needed to be saved.** This word is especially important for Anglicans. Some extremists have stretched this term beyond all sense by claiming that the Bible is 'enough' for all of the shaping of one's life, and that what isn't there doesn't belong in a Christian's life. Get real. The Bible only directly covers a small part of life's doings. It wasn't meant to cover everything; it was meant to convey God's love and God's good news. It has guidance for your life, but it takes thinking and praying and testing and trying to find out what that is. Yes, shape your life by it, but in God-given freedom. Serve God, not a book. All the core stuff is in there, and you can readily find it, but you have to work it through.

**Supreme :** The **biggest, highest, most powerful,** and **most commanding** of all sources for understanding or living the faith -- and not by just a tiny bit. This term is used in the Church of South India, and also parts of the Anglican tradition.

**Synoptic :** Greek, "**of one eye**". The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called this because they are similar works to each other, for the most part covering the same events and using most of the same sources. The Gospel of John, however, is very different in the order of events, which events are described, and the point of view taken about the life and ministry of Jesus. Therefore John is a Gospel, but not Synoptic. In modern times, Bible scholars have re-discovered the fact that each Synoptic Gospel has its own very special slant. Though they're not anywhere near as different as John's Gospel is, the Synoptics are each different works with their own vision to share.

**Timeless** : what the Bible teaches transcends the eras in which it was written or edited, is still true and important today, and **will continue to be true and important tomorrow**. This does not mean that every aspect of it is 'timeless'; for instance, what was important about the widow giving money was not its specific value in Roman currency -- that is dated and of its time -- but that she gave for God's purposes from what little she had -- something true of the faithful poor in any era. As with anything else eternal or supernatural, and like God lived here as Jesus, **the timeless truths of the Bible show themselves through what is natural and bound by time**. So each Bible story is very much a part of its time, but its message is very much a part of ours, and that of our children.

**Touchstone** : a dark stone (like basalt or jasper) used for figuring out the quality of precious metals. The metal would be drawn across the stone, and the streak would be compared with that of a standardized alloy to see if it was at least as good. In the Formula of Concord (Epitome, Rule & Norm, 7), Lutherans said that the Bible was the touchstone by which all teaching must be recognized and judged. That leads many people to the question, how does my life and thinking streak out on the Bible touchstone?

**Trustworthy: You can rely upon the Scriptures..** The Spirit is working through the Bible, thus you can turn to it and trust that you're not being tricked. You can set your life on it.

**Truthful: It tells the truth.** God will not deceive us, therefore neither does the Bible. We can trust the Bible to lead us down the right path, because the Spirit speaks through it for that purpose.

**Unique : Unlike anything else; distinctive, alone in kind.** The Spirit operated in a unique manner to create the Bible. The Spirit operated in a unique manner to spread it around. The Spirit acts in a unique manner on you when you read or hear it. The Spirit will keep doing so, literally "'til Kingdom come". The Bible is unique just as each person is unique. These things are all true in a way that is true of no other book.

**Verbal Icon** : This is a term from Eastern Orthodoxy. The Orthodox treat certain pictures, paintings, and other visual art of holy people and events of the Bible, especially of Jesus and Mary, as windows from which to see Jesus and the Kingdom of God. The Bible is, in this view, the earthly window onto God's love and God's intent for the created world. More precisely, through it we can discover who God-with-us, Jesus, really is. Just as we can envision spiritual matters by meditating on a visual icon, so also the Spirit uses the Bible as the window through which the Spirit reveals Christ to us. The Bible ranks above visual icons, because it is the source of what is depicted in them.

**Word of God : what God communicates to us.** God spoke, and the universe, light, earth, and life were created. God spoke loudest, clearest, and most transcendently by coming among us in Christ Jesus, being executed and being arisen from death. The place to find this Word is the Bible. Or, as it was put in the Barmen Declaration by anti-Nazi Christians during the Third Reich :

**"Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."**

Some Christians say things like that in a way that makes the First (Old) Testament, or any other part of Scripture somehow less the "Word of God" when it does not directly point to Christ. But that would be to badly warp what was being said. The whole testimony of the covenant relationship between God and God's people is what points to Christ, and the whole Bible is the only true testimony to it - not "other events, powers, historic figures and truths", such as the Nazi supporters were doing. There are so many facets to the Bible's witness of God's will and God's love that to strip parts of the Bible from the "Word of God" would be like stripping the meat off a live chicken -- you'll kill the chicken.

More churches today are shaping some form of a **three-fold description** of what is meant by 'Word of God', in order to do justice to how Scripture uses the term. Some mainline-renewal Protestants speak of God's word as written (the Bible), spoken (preached, taught, borne in witness), and tangible (Christ as God-with-us, and in sacrament). ELCA Lutherans, in their church constitution, speak of the Word of God as being Jesus, the Gospel message, and the Scriptures.

## Scholar's Issues

"Biblical criticism" is a scholarly effort to peel back the layers of work that created Scripture to find what was originally in each layer of writings, and why each layer came about. Such scholarly study can often be very helpful. For one example, it teaches us that while the way the Spirit formed the Bible is more focused and intense, there are key ways in which it is like the way the Spirit works among us for other tasks. Also, it can help show *how* God revealed the divine nature to us. Yet sometimes scholarly study can pull us away from the reason we read Scripture. At all times we must keep in mind that within scholarly study, there are good and bad ideas. For many centuries it has been observed that the fewer people there are who actually *believe* the Bible, the more scholarly studies we have *about* the Bible. Søren Kierkegaard (in his *\*Journals\**, #216) suggested that we might gather up all copies of the New Testament in one place, then pray that God would take them back, because we humans deal so poorly with it. He thought of returning it to God because the only hope for the Bible in his time was divine action. But it has always been so, and God has kept taking action for the Bible - thank God.

### the Documentary Hypothesis

**Documentary Hypothesis** : The theory that the first Five Books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) were not written by a single author, but were **assembled and edited from other works and different writers**.

Ancient Jewish and Christian tradition says that Moses wrote the first Five Books, but the tradition was clearly mistaken, even by the face value content of the writings themselves. Moses was a subject not an author, and he surely did not write about his own death in Deuteronomy 34:5. Though there were many Bible scholars over the centuries who thought that there were several authors, the first to devise a useful system for it was Julius Wellhausen, in 1877. He used the scientific methods that were being used on other literary works on the Bible to determine how it was written. Various forms of Wellhausen's theory quickly became accepted by most Bible scholars. The main version of the theory holds that there are four main sources for the books : J (characterized by using YHWH as God's name), E (characterized by the use of Elohim as God's name), D (the source for King Josiah's Deuteronomistic religious reformers), and P (the final editor of the work, after the Exile to Babylon, who added material of Priestly rules). This process also includes Samuel, Kings, Joshua, and Judges.

**There are no J, E, or P manuscripts, nor any ancient reports that such books ever existed.** Those who hold the theory may not expect to ever find separate J and E manuscripts, since they represent collections of what was passed along for many generations mainly by way of oral storytelling (J in Judah, E in the Northern Kingdom), plus material from official records. D's core document was Deuteronomy itself, giving a different angle on the founding events of the Jewish people, but its way of thinking is found throughout the Five Books as well as Joshua through Kings. P wrote mostly as an editor. Also, other written materials were used : Wars Of the Lord (Numbers 21:14-15), Jashar (in both Joshua and Samuel), and various books of records and prophets (in Kings). These, plus others we don't know about, would have been outside resources held in common by J, E, D, and possibly P. The only way we can know about J, E, or P is by way of literary analysis, but that always leaves wide open the possibility that the supposed 'separate sources' are more the figments of method than facets of reality.

The similarities between J and E, both in language and form, are often more striking than the differences. That should be no surprise, since both come from around the time that the Kingdoms split, when the common bonds were still strong. J and E tell many of the same stories from a slightly different angle, but more subtly than the Gospels tell about Jesus' life from different viewpoints. And D raises a chicken-and-egg question : did Judah's Deuteronomist reformers create Deuteronomy (so the main theory), or did the rediscovery of an already-written Deuteronomy cause the Deuteronomistic reforms (as described in 2 Kings 22:8)?

The better versions of the documentary hypothesis see the oral histories taking shape during the days of the Judges (starting at about 1150 BC), with **J** jelling in Rehoboam's reign (910 BC); **E** in Jeroboam's Northern reign (910 BC); **D** Deuteronomy late in Hezekiah's reign (700 BC), but lost or forgotten until Josiah's (621 BC), with Josiah-type reformers finishing Kings from exile (550s BC); and Ezra and his Priestly colleagues bundling the histories together and adding worship material after the return from exile (400s BC) in order to aid rediscovery of their national identity. It's some 700 years and hundreds of people in the making. And the Spirit was working with each person at each step along the way, so that the truth would come out.

What must be kept in mind is that very little of what the *Documentary Hypothesis* talks about has direct bearing on what Scripture is saying to you. It helps a bit in figuring out what the original authors may have been up to, and why the stories were passed along, but not much more than that. The lessons that God is trying to teach *you* are the same whether it was written by 4 writers over the course of 700 years or 400 writers over the course of 7 years. Your task is to read it and sort it out for yourself as to where God is leading you. The Hypothesis is just a scientific look at the Histories for literary reasons, which may or may not be of any use to you and those around you. And it is well-reasoned theory, not proven fact.

(Not to be confused with the Hypothesis of Documentaries, which states that eventually the nature, history, and educational cable TV channels will have made a documentary for each historical person or incident, in order to fill their schedule with new shows. Some hypothesize further that they will eventually make a documentary for most of the people alive today, probably including you, even if you're a total bore.)

## The Book of Q and the Gospel of Thomas

There are a lot of books and articles being written about 'other Gospels'. The two most often mentioned are 'Q' and the Gospel of Thomas.

Q was not a written gospel in the sense we now have. It was a written source or set of sources about incidents in Jesus's life that was used by the authors of Matthew and Luke for some of what they wrote. ('Q' stands for Ger. **Quelle**, which means in English 'source'.) The Q source no longer exists, and is not mentioned in any ancient writings. We know of it only by the strong common wordings of most of the non-Mark material found in Matt and Luke. The Q source may not have been authorized by any particular apostle, but was generally seen as accurate. So the authors of Matthew and Luke used it, and then tried in their own way to convey what the incidents meant.

Ever since scholars figured out that there must have been such a source, there have been those who have been trying to reconstruct it. But there's really no way of accurately doing so. We know the parts that Matthew or Luke used, but have no clue as to what they did not use. When they did use Q, they used it in their own way to make their own case, just like I use others' materials in preparing my Web site but I write it up my own way. So what ends up happening is that these scholars either publish a gussied-up harmony of Matt/Luke, or expand on the Q stuff by leaning on their own imaginations or **other sources outside the Bible.**

That's where the Gospel of Thomas comes in. Thomas was a work known by the ancients, coming from a faction within the North African or Syrian Gnostic community, and recently rediscovered. It clearly uses Matt, Mark, and Luke as sources, probably also John, and maybe Q and other witness stories. (Many accounts of Jesus' life may never have been written down, but were passed along by story-telling. Indeed, John says there's a lot more (John 20:30-31). The Gospel authors selected only what they deemed most central to the Gospel message.) It was written long after Matt or Luke, say, around 140 AD at the earliest, and isn't mentioned by anyone for generations after that. Because it is several generations later than the Gospels, it must by any reasonable standard be seen as a tertiary (third-rate) source, not to be relied upon for accuracy except as backup for primary or secondary sources. Even more importantly, instead of giving us differing angles on the same Jesus who had the same agenda (as the Gospels do), Thomas gives us a different-acting Jesus, with a different agenda which vaguely resembles that of a group that didn't exist until well after Jesus died.

To me, Thomas is not a gospel, just a partisan collection of sayings that portrays Jesus in a way that doesn't add up and makes him rather pointless for us today in the 21st Century. There could possibly be a passage or two somewhere in it that Jesus actually said that we don't otherwise have. Yet its viewpoints strike a badly false chord, so I think that it's not gainful for use by anyone who is not involved in scholarly pursuits, and even scholars must remember to take it for what it really is and nothing more.

One quick note on the phenomenon of the DaVinci Code : YO! It's a **NOVEL!** As in **FICTION!** As in, most of the 'facts' are drawn from unsupported conspiracy theories, partisan fringe writings, and cartoonish simplifications of history and personality, for the purpose of moving the plot of the story along. And man, does it move! So if you read it, read it like a good paperback thriller. It's really nothing more than that.

## Bible Code Theories

Several recent best-selling books have raised a question : could there be hidden prophecies in the Bible, found out by methods used to decode spy messages?

The writers of the Bible used two types of word or letter patterns. They used poetic parallelisms (where the words in each line of the doublet mean roughly the same thing but slightly different). The alphabetic acrostic starts each section with the next letter of the alphabet. With these, the pattern is deliberate and

made to be noticed; its meaning is hardly hidden. Such patterns are part of the art of writing, no less than rhyme or meter.

## Code Theory History

In Jesus' day, at Qumran, and for the century after the Temple's fall, the fringier parts of the Jewish religious world were deep into a search for hidden meaning. They sought methods which could tell them what could not be figured out by a common everyday good reader, things that God wanted only the chosen few to know. They used methods such as letter counts, numerology, reverse spelling, and symbolic equivalence. Most gnostics took up their trail. Much later, many Jewish Kabbalists also continued this quest, some of them adding methods not unlike those from the dying pagan underground of Europe. Most recently, some Fundamentalist Christians have used hidden-message methods to find the signs of the end times.

Today, seekers of hidden knowledge have powerful new tools. They can call on the modern sorcery of the silicon wizard, the computer, to discover intricate patterns they never would have thought of on our own. They use :

- Letter counts;
- **Equidistant letter sequences** and patterns (like, say, every 50th letter, or the first letter of each word);
- Word patterns (like, every seventh word, or the second word in each poetic line).

From these methods, they claim to discover assassinations, wars, and the US presidential candidates, as well as history from the recent past such as the rise of the Third Reich, the Great Tsunami, and the terrorist attack of the World Trade Center.

## Technical Problems

It's futile to try to find coherent true prophecies in the Bible by way of word or letter skip-patterns.

1. You have to agree on an exact text. The Bible Code theorists usually choose the standard Masoretic Text (MT), and don't correct it even for the few clearest examples of scribal error such as at 1 Samuel 5:6, 11:1, 14:23.
2. Even if we agree to use the MT, there are a small number of variations in it, which do not affect word meaning but do affect letter count formulas. Then, there is the question of vowels. The MT's written letters are consonants, and vowels are shown by points placed next to the consonants. Certain long vowels are usually indicated by using written consonants (the equivalents of our y and w). Yet there are places where these same long vowels are indicated only by vowel points, not letters, and thus they are not in the text. Then there's the related question of the Kethib and Qere, where the different pointings indicate slightly different meanings. This could affect the results of word pattern tests.

Word pattern and equidistant letter sequence tests can create results in any literature in any language. Such tests have been done on Melville, Tolstoy and Shakespeare, all having some sort of results. It would likely even produce results when done to Spirithome.com. (**C'mon. I dare you...**) So of course some patterns would show up in the Hebrew Scriptures. If you want to find something bad enough, you'll find a way to find it.

## The Bible Speaks -- Without A Cloak

The Bible itself has some choice words to say about this whole family of methods, in Deuteronomy 18:10-12 :

**"There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire, or uses divination, or practices augury, or interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or a spell-caster, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For the LORD detests whoever does such things, and those who do such detestable things the LORD your God will drive out before you."**

Divination is trying to find out something by using divine power. Augury (prediction) either calls on the power of other gods, or calls on Yahweh to act like the other gods. Bible code theories use word or letter patterns which, when pieced together, point to an event or person who is many years, even millenia, into the future, supposedly because God put it there. But God finds these things "detestable", and forbids the covenant people to do it. Why would the one true God stoop to acting like the non-gods that we've fashioned for ourselves? And where do we get the nerve to ask for that? Yet that is what bible code theories do. Why do they distrust the Bible and its God so much that they think God's hiding something in it? And what do they think they gain by knowing it, even if it was true? Take a look at what they say they find by these methods -- aren't they the same as what the astrologers, mediums, psychics, and seers talk about? Bible code methods treat the Bible like a crystal ball. But the Bible isn't about predicting momentous historic moments -- it's about living God's way in-between and during those moments.

The key thing to remember is that the Bible is here for a reason. It's there to tell you God's story and teach you God's will. **It's made to reveal, not conceal.** Even the parables, which intentionally aren't meant for those who won't bother to think about it, require only the most basic of instruction, and Jesus gives us even that. Jesus sent the Spirit to show us where what's openly found in the Bible is to lead us in life. **God wants you to know** all the stuff that counts, and puts it out there where you can find it without becoming an encryption expert.

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## Critical Questions about the Bible, its text, and the search for Jesus

### What is 'sensible criticism'?

A site user asked me this question :

- >How do you draw the line between "sensible and measured"
- > use of higher critical principles and the sort of radical stupidity
- > exhibited by the Jesus seminar?<

**RHL:** The place to draw the line is at what one is using a tool for. One of the crucial things wrong with the use of Bible-critical methods by many theological writers today is that it is wrong in its purpose.

The Jesus Seminar spends its time trying to figure out what Jesus did or didn't say, so they can construct some sort of a picture of Jesus that is supposedly stripped of the deceptive fenegeling of first-century Christians. This effort starts by assuming from the start that what the early church reported Jesus to be is not what Jesus was. (This is a 'hermenutic of suspicion', or in this case an exegesis of suspicion.) I for one think the assumption works havoc on the method. Suspicion is part of the sifting process, but not the essential foundation of an examination of Scripture or anything else. Those who wrote the Gospels, whether they were the actual Apostles or not (remember, Luke doesn't claim such status for himself), are the ones who are in the best position to describe to us Jesus' purpose and character, much more than His precisely-preserved words could ever do. They report on *a Jesus who made them who they were, not a 'them' that made Jesus into what they wanted*. If you forget that, then critical techniques will just lead you away from the truth of the matter.

The Seminar is on a wild goose chase. Or rather, given the use of the Wild Goose as a symbol for the Spirit by the early Celtic Christians, maybe they're running away from the wild goose chasing them. They will find a bare-bones "historical Jesus" when critical methods are used with their *a priori* presumptions, but they still won't find the real Jesus. Whatever is found in Scripture is there for us to follow, not nitpick about or play judgement games on. The critical tools are there to be used for getting beneath the surface of a passage of Scripture, to get at the scope and the range of what Jesus (or the prophets, historians, poets, and story-tellers) said and did. This may be found in the forms of literature they use to convey God's message. There may be some cultural or ethnic or socio-economic or gender blinders that have to be removed from us before we can see the message. We need to understand what was happening back in first-century Palestine before we can climb deeper into the passage. And yes, we have to deal with what imagery the writers drew on, what viewpoint they had, and how the text got passed to us. Each of these things are done every day in **unsystematic** ways by rank-and-file bible students everywhere; us educated types just make a system out of it so we can have more control over the method. With that comes a problem : **control over method is control over results**.

When believers use analytical tools, they **use them to dig deeper into the text to know better what God is saying so they can follow God better**. In that sense, it doesn't matter who actually wrote the words, just that the words are inspired of God like none others. When a commentator or seminary prof uses them, it's more often than not to acquire dispassionate knowledge, supposedly for others to use. "Dispassionate" learning may be useful for some situations, but it defeats the whole purpose of Scripture! It was told and written to *ignite* you!

## The Search For Jesus

I must start by saying that probing into 'the historical Jesus' is itself a good thing. Yet I have some very deep problems with many of the things said by many in the critical 'quest for the historical Jesus'. For most of the questers, before they even begin, they assume that the miracles and the claim to be 'one with the Father' are a fiction created by the early church. They build a Jesus that fits their own picture of what they think he should be, or what they think the human race needs him to be. Then, they cut out as 'inauthentic' anything that doesn't fit the picture.

For instance, the Gospels say Jesus identified himself as being 'one with the Father'; this is presumed by many Questers to be just the church's hindsight. Yet even politics by itself would not have forced so rapid a demise; some element of blasphemy would be needed to get everyone behind the charges. And that is what the Gospels report. Another example is that some of the Jesus Questers think that Jesus had no well-defined inner circle, that this was just projecting the leadership of the early church back into Jesus' time. Yet, it's fairly clear from Acts and Paul that 'the Twelve' didn't operate long as a group in the early church, and that other leaders quickly emerged -- such as Paul, Apollos, Timothy, Barnabas, and the deacon Philip. (This is echoed by tradition, which has the former disciples soon leaving Jerusalem to spread the Gospel in far-flung places, dying martyr's deaths there. While those stories themselves are heavily flavored with legend, we must pay attention to the fact that they all report the apostles separating.) As an organized body of leaders, the Twelve was history long before the Gospels were

written, so why would the gospel writers project it back? Having small bands of disciples was the typical way a great holy man would teach - or more precisely, mentor - back then. So it makes sense that Jesus would do it that way, too, and that these disciples would carry on the teachings once the teacher is gone.

The way to do history is from the evidence outward, not from the method inward, and then see what explains best what actually happened.

A lot of people are angry about what even the best of the Questers say about Jesus. The Questers know what Bible students have known for two millenia, and what Jesus himself knew from studying the Law and the Prophets : we have a lot of ideas that we think are Scriptural but are not, and we just gloss over a lot of things in Scripture because we *think* we know what it means. The 'search for Jesus' has reminded us of a lot of stuff we've shoved out of our neat traditions. For instance, Jesus was from a working artisan class, not one of the poor or rich. His homelessness was part of his itinerance -- his chosen task of going from place to place preaching -- and not due to poverty. Galileans weren't the rubes from the sticks that Jerusalemites loved to tease them as. Jesus felt pressured by crowds, snapped at a woman who sought healing, turned his mother away when she questioned his sanity, let his anger show in the Temple, and let a friend die so he could show his authority over death. These things are not nice, but they are in the evidence, openly stated in Scripture. But say that to the faithful, and you get anger. They don't want to come to grips with a human God or a divine Man, even if they confess this fact every week when they recite the creed, and sing praises of it every Christmas. You can't discover the good news about *why* it happened if you don't acknowledge *that* it happened.

I seek spiritual honesty, but it's hard to find.

### Try Thinking About These:

1. Describe what you experience when reading or hearing the Bible. (I don't mean what you're *supposed to* experience. I mean what you *do* experience.)
2. Choose a book of the Bible you've never read before, and read it aloud at the loudness and speed you would use in ordinary speech. Read it all the way through, even the technical parts. This can be done a chapter or two a day, which gives you more time to think about it.
3. Name one thing you have learned from the Bible.
4. When you're studying the Gospel, try memorizing some of the key summary lines Jesus says, or some of the promises Jesus makes for His followers.

## QUOTES

"Faith is the master, and reason the maid-servant."

----- **Martin Luther**

"Consider that the first time someone spoke of God in the third person and therefore no longer with God but about God was that very moment when the question resounded, 'Did God really say?' (Genesis 3:1). This fact ought to make us think."

----- **Helmut Thielicke**

"Through this experience I found that the Bible was not adequate. I needed God in a personal way -- not as an object of my study, but as friend, guide, comforter. I needed an existential experience of the Holy One. Quite frankly, I found that the Bible was not the answer. I found the Scriptures to be helpful -- even authoritatively helpful -- as a guide. But without my feeling God, the Bible gave me little solace.

In the midst of this 'summer from hell', I began to examine what had become of my faith. I found a longing to get closer to God, but found myself unable to do so through my normal means: exegesis, Scripture reading, more exegesis. I believe that I had depersonalized God so much that when I really needed him I didn't know how to relate."

----- **Daniel Wallace**, about what happened during his son's bout with rare cancer. In *\*Christianity Today\**, 12 Sept 1994.

## Questions

- Think of Bible ideas, symbol, or passages that have affected your life through non-Christian or general-public sources or people. (They're all over the place, but you may have to think a bit to find them.)
- Look at the list of words that are used for describing Scripture. Which one(s) mean the most to you? Why? Which one do you have the hardest time accepting? Why?
- If you're reading the Bible in a church study group, try asking yourselves the question : What does this say about our part in the mission of Christ's followers, acting together as his Body?

## Prayer For Guidance and Wisdom

Let us ask the Lord to broaden our ideas, make them clearer, and bring them closer to the truth, that we might also understand the other matters which He has revealed to His prophets. May we study the Holy Spirit's writings under the guidance of that same Spirit and compare one spiritual interpretation with another, so that our explanation of the texts may be worthy of God and the Holy Spirit whom inspired them. May we do this through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom glory and power belong -- and will belong throughout the ages.

----- **Origen**

Personal site: <http://members.aol.com/rlongman1/longman.html>  
<http://www.spirithome.com/sitemap.html> (Spirithome.com site map)  
<http://www.spirithome.com/foreword.html> (about Spirithome.com)  
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