



## The Message in a Bottle

By Stan Key

Once upon a time, there was an island in the middle of a vast ocean inhabited by the descendants of the survivors of a shipwreck that had happened long, long ago. A few islanders still spoke of a mainland far across the sea as their true home, but most people dismissed such talk as myths and legends. They liked to quote as a creed the words of one of their favorite philosophers: "This island is all there is, or was, or ever will be."

One day, a bottle washed up on the beach. The natives marveled at the beautiful glass and artistic design. This was something they had never seen, and they could not explain it. The mystery deepened when they realized that the bottle contained a piece of paper with a short message written in their own language: "Don't despair! Help is coming soon."

Everyone on the island was in great consternation. What could this mean? A wide variety of conflicting suggestions were offered, but there was no consensus to explain the phenomenon. The debate only intensified when other bottles washed ashore! For about six months these bottles kept coming; each one contained a different message. For example:

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**The Bible is God's "message in a bottle" to all people on planet Earth.**

- "Until we get there, treat one another with love and respect."
- "Believe, yes, believe in your coming deliverance."
- "All of us on the mainland love you! We are so sorry for your tragic circumstances."
- "Keep your eyes on the eastern horizon. A rescue party is on the way."
- "A beautiful home awaits you on the mainland."
- "Build a bonfire on the beach so we know where to find you."
- "If you receive other messages in bottles of other design, disregard them!"

Before long, the island was divided into several distinct groups of people. Everyone had an opinion. No one was indifferent. It seemed that the bottles, by their very presence on the island, were forcing people to take a position and choose sides.

Some concluded that this had to be a hoax. "Someone is playing a trick on us," they said. Explaining that a con artist on the island wanted to profit from people's gullibility, the members of this group believed that the messages in the bottles should be ignored.

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# What the Bible Says about Itself

By Wayne Grudem



One should not judge a book by its cover, but one *should* judge a book by what it claims to be! Wayne Grudem, professor of theology at Phoenix Seminary, outlines what the Bible claims for itself. (Taken from *Bible Doctrine* by Wayne Grudem. Copyright ©1999 by Wayne Grudem. Used by permission of Zondervan. www.zondervan.com)

There are frequent claims in the Bible that all the words of Scripture are God's words (as well as words that were written down by men). In the Old Testament, this is often seen in the introductory phrase, "Thus says the Lord," which appears hundreds of times. When the prophets use these words, they are claiming that their words are the absolutely authoritative words of God. When a prophet spoke in God's name in this way, every word he spoke had to come from God or he would be a false prophet (cf. Num. 22:38; Deut. 18:18-20; Jer. 1:9; 14:14; 23:16-22; 29:31-32; Ezek. 2:7; 13:1-16).

Furthermore, God is often said to speak "through" the prophet (1 Kgs 14:18; 16:12; 2 Kgs 9:36; Jer. 37:2; Zech. 7:7). Thus, what the prophet says in God's name, God says (1 Kgs 13:26 with v. 21; Hag. 1:12). Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey anything a prophet says is to disbelieve or disobey God himself (Deut. 18:19; 1 Sam. 10:8; 1 Kgs 20:35-36).

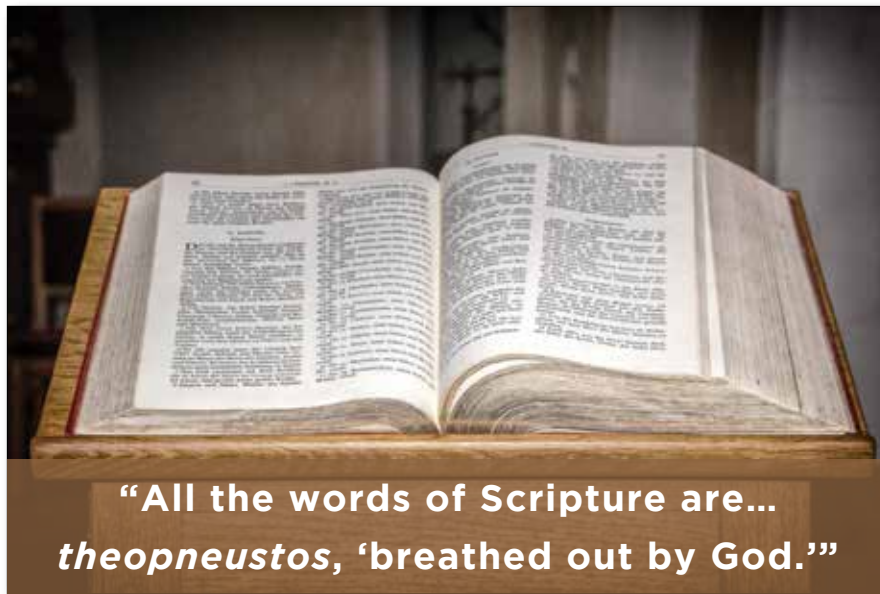
These verses by themselves do not claim that all the words in the Old Testament are God's words, for these verses themselves are referring only to specific sections of spoken or written words in the Old Testament. But the cumulative force of these passages is to demonstrate that within the Old Testament we have written records of words that are said to be God's own words. When we realize that all of the words that were part of the "law of God" or the "book of the covenant" were considered God's words, we see that the whole Old Testament claims that kind of authority (see Ex. 24:7; Deut. 29:21; Josh. 24:26).

In the New Testament, a number of passages indicate that all of the Old Testament writings are thought of as God's words. Second Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (NIV). Here "scripture" (Gk. *graphe*) must refer to the Old Testament written Scripture, for that is what the word refers to in every one of its fifty-one occurrences in the New Testament.

Paul here affirms that all of the Old Testament writings are *theopneustos*, "breathed out by God." Since it is *writings* that are said to be "breathed out," this breathing must be understood as a metaphor for speaking the words of Scripture. This verse thus states in brief form what was evident in many Old Testament passages: The Old

Testament writings are regarded as God's Word in written form. For every word of the Old Testament, God is the one who spoke (and still speaks) it, although God used human agents to write down these words.

A similar indication of the character of all Old Testament writings as God's words is found in 2 Peter 1:21. Speaking of the prophecies of Scripture (v. 20), Peter says that none of these prophecies ever came "by the impulse of man," but that "men moved along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." It is not Peter's intention to deny completely the role of human volition or personality in the writing of Scripture (he says that the men "spoke") but rather to say that the ultimate source of every prophecy was never a man's decision about what he wanted to write but rather the Holy Spirit's action in the prophet's life, carried out in ways unspecified here (or, in fact, elsewhere in Scripture). This indicates a belief that all of the Old Testament prophecies (and, in light of verses 19-20, this probably includes all of the written Scripture of the Old Testament) are spoken "from God": that is, they are God's own words.



Many other passages could be cited (see Matt. 19:5; Luke 1:70; 24:25; John 5:45-47; Acts 3:18; 13:47; 28:25; Rom. 1:2; 3:2; 9:17; 1 Cor. 9:8-10; Heb. 1:1-2, 6-7), but the pattern of attributing to God the words of Old Testament Scripture should be very clear.

At two places in the New Testament, we see New Testament writings also being called "scripture" along with the Old Testament writings. In 2 Peter 3:15-16, Peter

says, "Our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in *all his letters*. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do *the other scriptures*" (emphasis added).

Here Peter shows not only an awareness of the existence of written epistles from Paul but also a clear willingness to classify "all of [Paul's] letters" with "the other scriptures." This is an indication that very early in the history of the church all of Paul's epistles were considered to be God's written words in the same sense as the Old Testament texts were. Similarly, in 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul writes, "For the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" The first quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4, but the second occurs nowhere in the Old Testament. It is rather a quotation from Luke 10:7. Paul here quotes Jesus' words as found in Luke's Gospel and calls them "scripture."

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# What Kind of Book Is This?

By Thomas Merton (1915–1968)



Trappist monk, Roman Catholic mystic, theologian, author, and social activist, Thomas Merton's works need to be read with discernment by evangelical Christians. In a little volume entitled *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), Merton gives a profoundly simple introduction into what it means to read the Bible. This article is abridged and slightly edited (11, 14–18, 21–27, 34–37, 68–69).

**“W**hat kind of book is this?” Such a question cannot be answered without taking into account the very peculiar claims that have been made for the Bible by Christian, Jewish, and even Muslim believers: claims which, to many modern men, are outrageous. Claims that this book is unlike any other, and that man's very destiny depends on it.

We cannot understand anything about the Bible unless we face the fact that these claims are made seriously, and that the outrage taken at them is also fully serious. Neither can be discounted. It is of the very nature of the Bible to affront, perplex, and astonish the human mind. Hence the reader who opens the Bible must be prepared for disorientation, confusion, incomprehension, perhaps outrage.

In saying that we must expect to be outraged by the Bible, I am not trying to maintain that we must let it insult our intelligence. The Bible may be difficult and confusing, but it is meant to challenge our intelligence, not insult it. It becomes insulting when it is distorted by fanaticism and by foolish religiosity; but we must not blame the Bible for the distortions imposed on it by others.

The Bible claims to contain a message which will not merely instruct you, not merely inform you about the distant past, not merely teach you certain ethical principles, nor map out a satisfying hypothesis to explain your place in the universe and give your life meaning—much more than that, the Bible claims to be: The Word of God. This basic claim is not so much that it is to be blindly accepted because of God's authority, but that *it is recognized by its transforming and liberating power*. The “Word of God” is recognized in actual experience because it does something to anyone who really “hears” it: it transforms his entire existence. Thus, Paul writes to the Thessalonians:

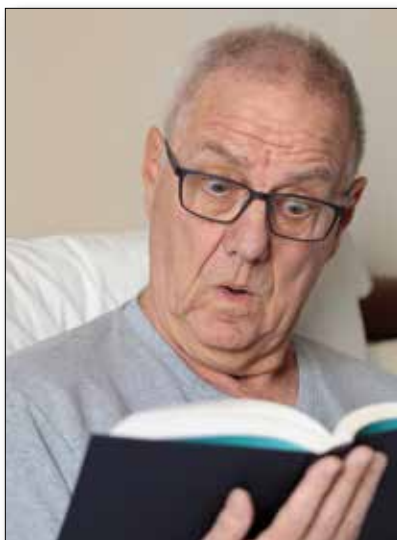
*And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)*

The word of God is then able to prove itself by its transforming power which brings love, unity, peace,

understanding, and freedom where before there were prejudice, conflict, hatred, division, and greed. If this power appears to have failed and not to have shown its full efficacy, perhaps it is the believers who have failed the Bible and not the other way around.

Barth pointed out that when you begin to question the Bible, you find that the Bible is also questioning you. When you ask: “What is this book?” you find that you are also implicitly being asked: “Who is this that reads it?”

But this kind of confrontation is not inevitable. There are many less radical ways of reading the Bible. Curiously, the most serious religious people, or the most concerned scholars, those who constantly read the Bible as a matter of professional or pious duty, can often manage to evade a radically involved dialogue with the book they are questioning. In fact (we know it too well!) there is such a thing as studying the isolated words and other details with such intense application that one loses all interest in their meaning.



**“When you begin to question the Bible, you find that the Bible is also questioning you.”**

We must recognize that those for whom the Bible has become a habit may well defraud themselves of deeper understanding by deciding in advance what they want of the Bible and what it wants of them. They go to the Bible knowing in just what ways it suits them. They dig into it to satisfy their own needs. But the Bible is not there merely to satisfy our needs or to give us what suits us. On the contrary, the Biblical message may seem at first sight to be something that does not suit us at all in any way,

culturally, ethically, spiritually, theologically. It may be supremely disconcerting, ambiguous, even frightening. Indeed, when closely examined, the Bible may pose a threat to what has hitherto seemed to us to be “faith.”

There is, in a word, nothing comfortable about the Bible—until we manage to get so used to it that we make it comfortable for ourselves. But then we are perhaps too used to it and too at home in it. Let us not be too sure we know the Bible just because we have learned not to be astonished at it, just because we have learned not to have problems with it. Have we perhaps learned at the same time not to really pay attention to it? Have we ceased to question the book and be questioned by it? Then perhaps our reading is no longer serious.

We must not therefore open the Bible with any set determination to reduce it to the limits of a preconceived pattern of our own. And in reading it we must not succumb to the temptation of short-cuts and half-truths. All attempts to narrow the Bible down until it fits conveniently into the slots prepared for it by our prejudice will end with our misunderstanding the Bible and even falsifying its truth. 🕊

# A Verse-a-Day Is Not Enough

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)



In his classic book on Christian community, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954), Bonhoeffer discusses the importance of private, daily Bible reading as well as the public reading of Scripture in corporate worship. Criticizing the shallow, sentimental verse-of-the-day approach, he encourages Christians to get serious about understanding the Word of God. Abridged and slightly edited, this article is taken from chapter two, “The Day with Others” (50–57).

Paul tells Timothy; “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim. 4:13). Almost all of us have grown up with the idea that Scripture reading is only a matter of hearing the Word of God for this particular day. That is why for many Scripture reading consists only of a few, brief, selected verses which are to form the guiding thought of the day. But brief verses cannot and should not take the place of reading the Scripture as a whole. Holy Scripture is more than a watchword. It is also more than “light for today.” It is God’s revealed Word for all men, for all times. Holy Scripture does not consist of individual passages; it is a unit and is intended to be used as such. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships, in the connection of Old and New Testaments, of promise and fulfillment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection, faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived.

A Christian family fellowship should surely be able to read and listen to a chapter of the Old Testament and at least half of a chapter of the New Testament every morning and evening. When the practice is first tried, of course, most people will find even this modest measure too much and will offer resistance. It will be objected that it is impossible to take in and retain such an abundance of ideas and associations, that it even shows disrespect for God’s Word to read more than one can seriously assimilate. These objections will cause us quite readily to content ourselves again with reading only verses.

If it is hard for us, as adult Christians, to comprehend even a chapter of the Old Testament in sequence, this should fill us with shame. What kind of testimony is that? We must admit that the Scriptures are still largely unknown to us. We must earnestly and faithfully retrieve what has been neglected. And should not ministers be the very first to get to work at this point?

I know that many will complain that the Scripture reading is often too long and there is much they do not understand. To this it must be said, that for the mature Christian, every Scripture reading is “too long,” even the shortest one. What I mean is that the Scripture is a whole and every word, every sentence possesses such multiple relationships with the whole that it is impossible always to keep the whole in view when listening to details. Thus, every passage far surpasses our understanding.

Consecutive reading of biblical books forces everyone who wants to hear to put himself, or to allow himself to be found, where God has acted once and for all for the salvation of men. We become a part of what once took place for our salvation. We, too, pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land. With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief and through punishment and repentance experience again God’s help and faithfulness. All this is not mere reverie but

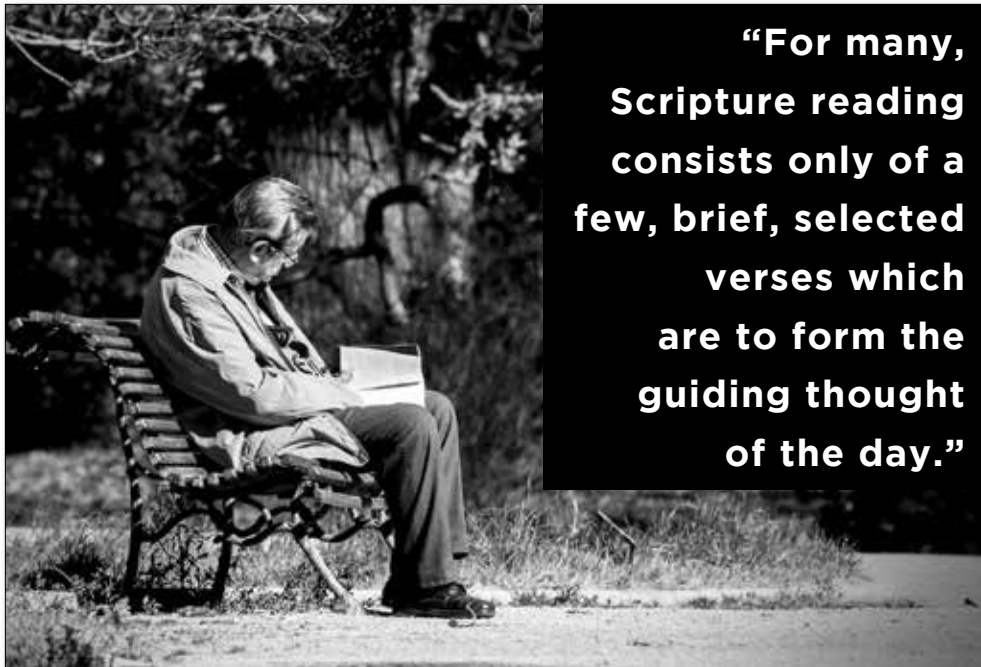
holy, godly reality. We are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth. We become participants in God’s action in the sacred story, the history of Christ on earth. And only in so far as we are *there*, is God with us today also.

A complete reversal occurs. It is in fact more important for us to know what God did to Israel and to his son Jesus Christ, than to seek what God intends for us

today. The fact that Jesus Christ died is more important than the fact that I shall die. I find no salvation in my life history, but only in the history of Jesus Christ. What we call our life, our troubles, our guilt, is by no means all of reality; there in the Scriptures is our life, our need, our guilt, and our salvation. Because it pleased God to act for us there, it is only there that we shall be saved. Only in the Holy Scriptures do we learn to know our own history.

We must learn to know the Scriptures again, as the Reformers and our fathers knew them. We must not grudge the time and the work that it takes. One who will not learn to handle the Bible for himself is not an evangelical Christian.

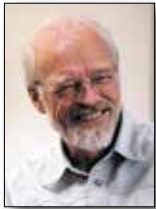
It might be asked further: How shall we ever help a Christian brother and set him straight in his difficulty and doubt, if not with God’s own Word? All our own words quickly fail. But he who can speak out of the abundance of God’s Word, the wealth of directions, admonitions, and consolations of the Scriptures, will be able through God’s Word to drive out demons and help his brother. 🕊



**“For many, Scripture reading consists only of a few, brief, selected verses which are to form the guiding thought of the day.”**

# Eat This Book

By Eugene H. Peterson (1932–2018)



Presbyterian pastor, professor of spiritual theology, and author, Eugene Peterson maintains that *how* we read the Bible is as important as *that* we read it, maybe more. *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Eerdmans, 2006) is the second volume of his five-part work on spiritual theology. This article is a compilation taken from chapters two and five (18–22, 63–66). Adapted and reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Most of us carry around a handful of essential commands that keep us on track: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart.... Love your neighbor.... Repent and believe.... Pray without ceasing.... Take up your cross....” Add this to your repertoire: Eat this book. Not merely read your Bible but *eat this book*.

Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, hands raised in adoration of the Father. The metaphorical imperative arrives among us backed by the authority of St. John:

*Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, “Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” So*

*I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, “Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.” So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. (Revelation 10:8–10 NRSV)*

Just as John was approaching the midpoint in the sequence of vision-messages, he saw a gigantic angel, one foot planted in the ocean and the other on the continent, with a book in his hand. From this comprehensive land-and-sea pulpit, the angel was preaching from the book, a sermon explosive with thunder. This was a sermon no one would sleep through! John started to write down what he was hearing—he’d never heard a sermon like this one—but was then told not to. A voice told John to take the book from the huge angel. And so he did, he walked up to the angel and said, “Give me the book.” The angel gave it to him, but then said, “Here it is; eat it. Don’t just take notes on the sermon. Eat this book.” And John did it. He put away his notebook and pencil. He picked up his knife and fork. He ate the book. The book that John ate was the Bible, or as much of the Bible as was written at that time.

Eating a book takes it all in, assimilating it into the tissues of our lives. Readers become what they read. If Holy Scripture is to be something other than mere gossip about God, it must be internalized. The angel does not instruct St. John to pass on information about God: he commands him to assimilate the word of God so that when he does speak, it will express itself artlessly in his syntax just as the food we eat is unconsciously assimilated into our nerves and muscles and put to work in speech and action.

St. John wasn’t the first biblical prophet to eat a book. Six hundred years earlier, Ezekiel had been given a book and commanded to eat it (Ezek. 2:8–3:3). Ezekiel’s contemporary, Jeremiah, also ate his version of the Holy Bible (Jer. 15:16). Ezekiel and Jeremiah, like John, lived in a time in which there was widespread pressure to live by a very different text than the one revealed by God in these Holy Scriptures. The diet of Holy Scripture for all three of them issued in sentences of tensile strength, metaphors of blazing clarity, and a prophetic life of courageous suffering.



**“Don’t just take notes on the sermon. Eat this book.”**

There is a detail in this story of John eating the book that I have ignored until now, but I can’t avoid it any longer: eating the Bible gave John a stomachache. It tasted good when he put it in his mouth, but when it got to his stomach, he got sick on it (see Rev. 10:10).

For most of us, our first experience with the Bible is sweet; we find ourselves in this book, and that is so wonderful. We acquire a taste for the promises

and blessings of God, we learn to appreciate the sound counsel and direction for our lives, we memorize a few psalms that we can recite in dark and lonely times and find comfort. There is so much here to delight us. “How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (Ps. 119:10).

But sooner or later we find that not everything is to our liking in this book. It starts out sweet to our taste, and then we find that it doesn’t sit well with us at all; it becomes bitter in our stomachs. We find that the book is written to involve us in a reality, God’s reality, that doesn’t cater to our fantasies of ourselves. There are hard things in this book, hard things to hear, hard things to obey. There are words in this book that are difficult to digest. John got a severe case of indigestion.

We are fond of saying that the Bible has all the answers. And that is certainly correct. But the Bible also has all the questions, many of them that we would just as soon were never asked of us. The Bible is a most comforting book; it is also a most discomfiting book. Eat this book; it will be

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# When Scripture Is Offensive

By Timothy C. Tennent



In his important new book *For the Body: Recovering a Theology of Gender, Sexuality, and the Human Body* (Zondervan/Seedbed, 2020), Dr. Tennent, president of Asbury Theological Seminary, addresses the issue of Biblical authority. Many today are offended by Biblical passages that condemn homosexual practice.

How should the church respond? Abridged, and lightly edited, this article is taken from chapter ten, "Bruised and Blessed by the Gospel" (157-74). Used with permission.

In the on-going debate about homosexuality, marriage, and gender, how does the church understand the place and function of the Bible? While the wider culture certainly has a range of ideas and attitudes about the Bible, this is a particular challenge within the church, since throughout Christian history the Bible has been the assumed authority and the basis of God's self-revelation.

However, some seminaries today train future pastors to treat the Bible like an ancient relic, an artifact in a museum.

If studied carefully, they say, it will yield insights into how people in the ancient world felt about God, and from there we can extrapolate to what it might mean for us to be faithful to God in our own time. This approach implies, whether explicitly or implicitly, that the Bible is inadequate to address the challenges we face today since its words are embedded in cultures that were violent, patriarchal, and misogynist.

This approach to the Bible is called a "hermeneutic of suspicion." The word *hermeneutics* refers to the science of Biblical interpretation, and a "hermeneutic of suspicion" means that the starting point for interpreting the Bible is not an acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God but an assumption that much of Scripture is built on a faulty moral foundation and should be questioned. To put it bluntly, the starting point of Scriptural interpretation should be one of suspicion, not "faith." Training in this method of interpretation encourages contemporary pastors to utilize the broad themes of the Bible, such as the fight for justice, the universal love of God, or the call to show compassion to our neighbor, to preach a message that aligns with their commitments and beliefs. They can just avoid the more troubling details of a Biblical text.

This crisis of authority constitutes the first problem we face in the church today. The church must regain the conviction that the Bible is the central authority for our faith and moral principles. And we must reject the hermeneutic of suspicion that undermines the authority of God's Word.

A second problem we must face is the belief by many in our culture today that the teachings of the Bible on sexuality are harmful to people. This is particularly the case when we talk about the real and perceived harm being done to those who identify as part of the LGBT+ community. Christians, who believe that all persons are created in the image of God, should allow no space for violence toward anyone in our society, even if we do not accept that homosexual behavior or the practice of gender reassignment is morally praiseworthy.

Christians have long negotiated this tension between accepting people while condemning sinful behavior with the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin." This phrase evolved from a letter written by Augustine in 424, where he states, "with love for mankind and hatred of sins." In 1972, the United Methodist Church placed in their *Discipline* the statement that all persons are "of sacred worth" and should, therefore, be welcomed; but "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." This is a clearly recognizable form of the "love

the sinner, hate the sin" distinction. It reminds us that God summons us to himself while we yet stand before him as sinners.

There is an underlying assumption today that the church must never hold a position that causes someone any pain or discomfort—the postmodern "tyranny of niceness." Above all else, we must never say anything that offends someone, because it may cause them pain. In response, the words of Soren Kierkegaard,



in his *Attack upon Christendom*, are worth considering. Kierkegaard declared, "Christianity is the profoundest wound that can be inflicted upon us, calculated on the most dreadful scale to collide with everything." I believe that when someone argues that the message of the church has caused them "harm," we should not put our heads down and apologize—unless that harm has been from a *posture* of disrespect or disdain. But if the harm is caused by the message or moral *position* of the Biblical text, we should agree: "Yes, the gospel both blesses and bruises us all." Every true Christian should be able to confess that they have been bruised by the demands of discipleship, the call to die to self and to live a holy life, "taking up our cross to follow him." Jesus does not just *wound* us; he calls for us to die to ourselves.

Jesus asks us to give up our greed, our propensity to gossip, our jealousy, our disordered affections, our anger, and our self-orientation. Are we born this way? Yes, we are. We are all members of a race full of sinners, and there are no exceptions. Our hearts are deceitful, and we need redemption. The gospel nails us all to the cross with Christ

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# Make Me a Captive, Lord!

By Alister McGrath



Alister McGrath is a Northern Irish Anglican theologian, historian, scientist, and Christian apologist. In his book *A Passion for Truth* (InterVarsity Press, 1996) he sets forth the case for the authority of Scripture (53–66). Using the sad example of churches in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, he warns Christians today of what can happen when the church accommodates itself to culture. Used with permission.

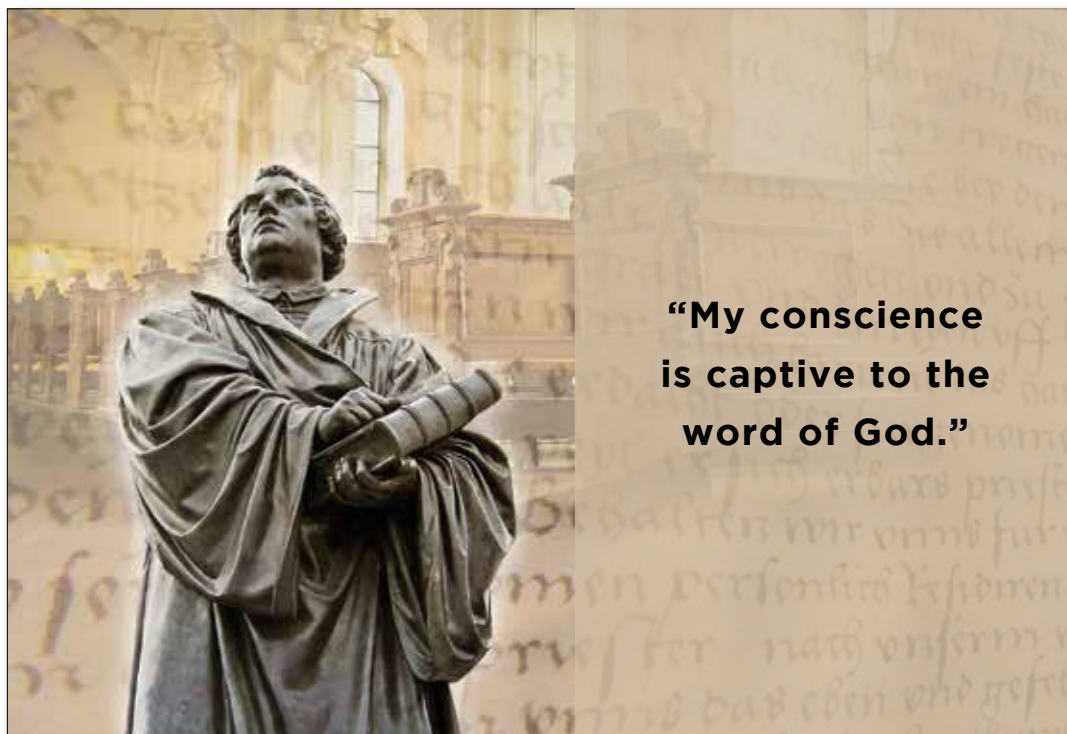
At the Diet of Worms (1521), Martin Luther famously declared: “My conscience is captive to the word of God.” In much the same way, evangelicalism has seen itself as captive to that same word of God. The principle of the sufficiency of Scripture is of central importance to evangelicalism.

Yet this must not be understood to mean that evangelicalism is “a religion of a book.” Rather, evangelicalism focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ, affirming his centrality and sovereignty in all matters of faith and life. Yet there is an inextricable and intimate connection between the word of God incarnate and the word of God in Scripture, in that Jesus Christ is made known to us through the witness of Scripture, which in turn centers on his person and work. Scripture, when rightly interpreted, leads to Christ; Christ can be known properly only through Scripture. As Luther put it, Scripture “is the swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ is laid.”

It is a well-established fact of history that the church has always regarded Scripture as authoritative, both in the sense of being the origin of its foundational ideas and values, and also the critic of those on offer from other sources. It must also be stressed that there are those who have difficulties with the “authority of Scripture” precisely because they have a difficulty with the concept of authority itself. A central theme of modernism is a craving for total autonomy and self-definition. The notion of authority, or of any limitations of options, is thus seen as repressive. Modernity and, in a somewhat different manner, postmodernity, want to be free to construct their own realities.

Critics of the notion of Biblical authority sometimes suggest that we would be liberated if we were to abandon the authority of Scripture. It seems to me that this is simply a covert demand to acknowledge the authority of something—or someone—else. The Christian insistence upon the authority of Scripture reflects a determination not to permit anything from outside the Christian heritage to become the norm for what is truly “Christian.” Theological history has provided us with many all-too-uncomfortable examples of what happens when a theology cuts itself loose from the controlling influence of the Christian tradition and seeks norms from outside that tradition.

A tragic example may be found by looking to the history of the German church under Adolf Hitler, which was obliged to acknowledge the authority of “German culture.” Some meekly submitted to this ideological straitjacket; others were bold enough to insist that Christianity must remain faithful to itself and refuse to be controlled by anything other than the living Christ, as we find him in Scripture. The celebrated Barmen Declaration of May 1934 rejected the Nazi doctrine that God was now speaking a new message to humanity through German history. This declaration was rejected by the “German Christians,” a group within the mainline Protestant denominations who were sympathetic to Hitler. The Ansbacher Consultation, issued by the “German Christians” in June 1934 in response to the Barmen Declaration, declared that theology and the church should take their cues from culture and the state and argued that the church should adapt itself radically to conform to the new German situation, recognizing that



God had given the German people “a pious and faithful ruler” in the person of Adolf Hitler.

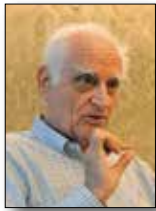
Acknowledging the authority of Scripture is thus something profoundly liberating. It frees us from the slavish demand that we follow each and every cultural trend and offers us a framework whereby we may *judge* them, as the Confessing Church chose to judge Hitler, rather than follow him—despite the enormous cultural pressure placed upon them to conform to the prevailing cultural climate. Reclaiming the Bible allows us to imitate Christ, rather than the latest whim of a fragmented and confused culture.

There is a lesson here for today’s western churches, who often seem to be throwing themselves uncritically at the feet of today’s cultural norms. We criticize the German Christians for obeying Hitler in the 1930s, conveniently choosing to overlook that they were simply submitting themselves to the prevailing cultural norms. We are doing the same today, by allowing ourselves and our churches

*Continued on page 11*

# The Book that Reads Me!

By Jean-Louis Chrétien (1952–2019)



Many will be surprised to learn that a professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne (Paris) not only believed the Bible but encouraged others to read it so that they could become listeners and doers of the Word! In his book *Under the Gaze of the Bible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, translated by John M. Dunaway), Jean-Louis Chrétien shows us how to engage

the Divine Word with both our minds and our hearts. Abridged and slightly edited, this article is taken from the first chapter, “Allowing Oneself to Be Read Authoritatively by the Holy Scripture” (6–22).

To consider the Bible inspired is to believe that it is the Word of God, the true word of the true God, conferred and delivered by the spirit, the mouth, and the hand of numerous men of the past in order that it might be conferred and delivered to the spirit, the mouth, and the hand of ever-new humans. The Holy Scriptures are thus at once divine and human: not divine on the one hand and human on the other, divine here and human there, and in particular not divine wherever it is convenient for me and human wherever it isn't, but altogether human and altogether divine.

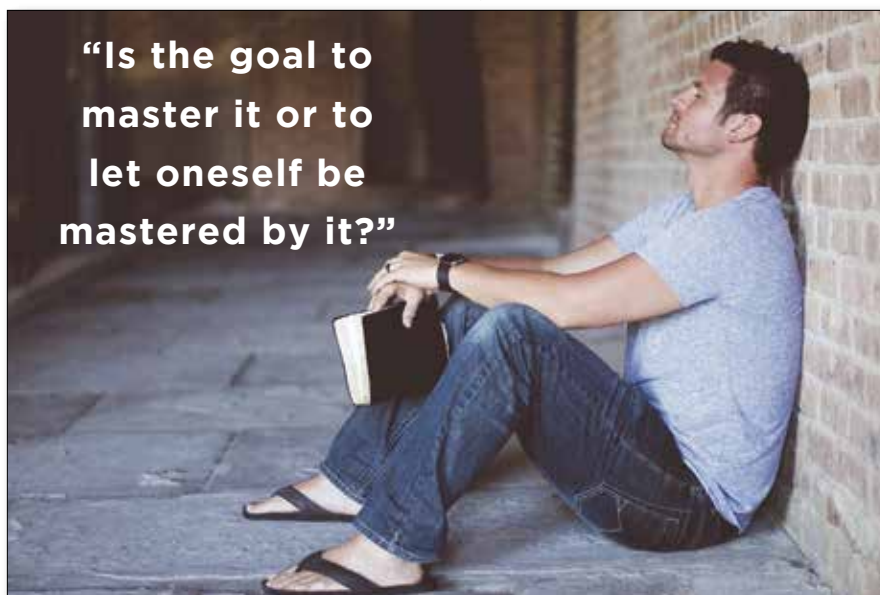
This divine-human character of the Holy Bible has a properly staggering consequence to which familiarity and incredulity blind us. We have the possibility of holding in our hands, scanning with our eyes, placing at our bedside or on our bookshelf the very Word of God, in the form and under the veil of a book in various bindings and editions. We hold the Word that holds us. The Holy Bible places at our disposal the unapproachable sanctity of the living God.

A studious reading of the Bible normally aims at mastering as much as possible the language, the form, and the tenor of what it reads in such a way as to assimilate it, appropriate it, make it our own. But when it is a matter of the Word of God, we must ask: Is the goal to master it or to let oneself be mastered by it? To question it or to let ourselves be touched and seized by it? To read it or to allow oneself to be read by the gaze that it directs toward us? Here the highest work is the absence of work, that is, to let this Word do its work in us. A test of *nudity* is required. Nothing says this more strongly than these words from the Letter to the Hebrews:

*The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts like any double-edged sword but more finely: it can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or joints from the marrow; it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts. (Hebrews 4:12 JB)*

“Everything is laid bare” before it (Heb. 4:13). Without this step of nudity before the Word, my reading of Scripture will enable me to hear nothing but the incessant murmur of my own idle chatter. To be naked means to let oneself be measured by the Word of God instead of presuming to be the measure of it.

Scripture uses two analogies to help us better understand how best to use it. First, it compares itself to a *letter*. Whether it be public or private, individual or collective, a letter is defined as such only by the inscription in it of its addressee or addressees. It is *addressed*, and this address, whatever might be the variable form it takes, belongs to it by its essence. Augustine writes, “On this [celestial] life toward which we are making our way as pilgrims, some letters have reached us. They are the Scriptures themselves....” Gregory also speaks of the Bible as a letter addressed to us by the Almighty. If the earthly emperor addressed us a missive, we would read it in all urgency, dropping all other business, yet we neglect the one sent by God.



This analogy of the letter has another aspect: it calls for a response. The response will consist of words and acts. Even the absence of a response is still a response and does not change our having received this letter nor mean that things are as before.

Second, Scripture uses the analogy of a *mirror*; the Bible can reveal us to ourselves. This image is sometimes associated with the Epistle of James (see 1:23–24). Scripture, a

mirror to the soul, is a place of self-recognition; to flee this recognition is also to flee oneself and seek to be ignorant of oneself. God, Augustine says, “made of his Scripture a mirror for you... See then if you are what it says, and if you are not, groan in order to become such.” To be displeased with oneself in one's ugliness is already to begin to become beautiful. The word of God, then, not only reveals me to myself in my ugliness; it also invites me to get free from it and shows me how to do so.

As a mirror, the Bible is also God's gaze toward us. The gaze questions and tests; it is a gaze under which we are called to become ourselves or crumble and collapse. As Claudel says, “It is not proper to say that we interrogate Scripture. It would be more accurate to recognize it is Scripture that interrogates us.”

To read the Bible is always to enter into dialogue and into community with those who read it in the past. This difficult book can only be deciphered by us together. He who would read the Bible as if it spoke only for him alone would transform it into a private revelation and forget the fact that it is the Word of salvation proposed to all. 🕯



# This Is Our Testimony

The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple. (Psalm 119:130 NKJV)

Having a solid *doctrine* of the Word of God is important. Having a solid *experience* of the God of the Word is more so! From our FAS family, we have collected testimonies to the power of God's Word to change everything.

## **CRAIG CAMPBELL (PENNSYLVANIA)**

When my marriage and life hit rock bottom, I decided to go back to church. That Sunday the sermon was from Genesis 45. I felt "safe" because I knew the Joseph story. I remembered coloring his coat of many colors in Sunday School. But the pastor focused on verse 24. Because of all the conflicts that characterized my life, the message hit home. That sermon—and that verse—changed my life! I am now planting a church and going to seminary.

*Then Joseph sent his brothers away, and as they departed, he said to them, "Do not quarrel on the way." (Genesis 45:24)*

## **MIKE HANNAY (NEW YORK)**

Recently, during a very stressful situation at work, I wasn't able to sleep. After about a week of tossing and turning, the Lord gave me Psalm 18:2-3. Each time I recited the words, claiming them for my situation, I was able to sleep! It brings tears to my eyes to realize the Lord of the universe answers the prayers of someone like me.

*The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. (Psalm 18:2-3)*

## **MARINA LAYTON (OHIO)**

A year ago, just as our nation was descending into the trauma of the pandemic, a verse I learned from childhood kept coming to my mind. As I prayed over our national needs and my personal needs, it seemed that God was asking me to live in the reality of Proverbs 3:5-6. Now, I am asking God to help me give it to my children and grandchildren so that it can be foundational for them as well.

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6 NKJV)*

## **RUTHIE GENDICH (MICHIGAN)**

When I was pregnant with our fourth child, the Lord one day impressed upon me Isaiah 43:2. I knew the words about trials and difficulties were for me. But why? A few weeks later I understood. When the time came for the baby to come, I was home alone. I remember how the Lord asked me to trust that he would not allow me to be consumed by the deep water or fire. I did, and with his help safely delivered a beautiful, healthy baby boy!

*When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression,*

*you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. (Isaiah 43:2 NLT)*

## **GARY AVERS (KENTUCKY)**

I grew up with the false understanding that love was a function of performance; the better I performed, the more I was loved. This false belief carried over into the way I did ministry. God showed me through Isaiah 43:4 that his love comes first and any ministry is a result of the abundance of his love. Now, the motive for my ministry is solely that others can experience the great love of God.

*Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. (Isaiah 43:4)*

## **JOY GRIFFIN (GEORGIA)**

When I told my pastor that I was miserable, he replied by telling me what Jesus said in Matthew 5:6. Then he added, "I know you are hungry, Joy. Jesus can fill you!" How right he was, and how true to his Word God has been throughout my life.

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

## **STEVE WHYTE (KENTUCKY)**

I was happily married with four children, a great job, a nice house, and two cars in the garage, but at the age of twenty-five, I began to drink. This soon became a problem and my marriage and health began to deteriorate rapidly. My best efforts to stop were to no avail so finally I began attending Alcoholics Anonymous. Step Two was the key: I came to believe that a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity. With the Lord's help I've been free from alcohol for thirty-four years!

*Jesus said to him, "All things are possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23)*

## **MARK KILLAM (KENTUCKY)**

Soon after my conversion as a college junior, I had an attack of appendicitis. While reading the Bible in my hospital bed, I read Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. Realizing that the despised Samaritan was the hero of Jesus' story, the Holy Spirit began to speak to me, a son-of-the-South, about my own racial prejudice; something I had not seen as a sin before. I repented of my sin and that day God began the process of transforming my heart by filling it with his love for all people.

*Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37)*

## **KEN SOUTHGATE (KENTUCKY)**

It was a terribly disappointing season in my life, and I was bitter, angry, and resentful. I was living in my own hell,

*Continued on page 10*

*This Is Our Testimony* continued from page 9

lost in the world of “Why?” God used John 9:3 to shake me up and turn me around. This scripture helped stop my fruitless whining and incessant blaming so that I could see what I had been missing: this is an opportunity to glorify God. I realized I had been asking the wrong question! Jesus redirected my focus from my broken past so that I could fully embrace the adventure of faith again.

*“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:3 NIV)*

### KEVIN BARRON (MISSOURI)

Like most teenagers, I often journeyed through doubts, fears, and insecurities. I struggled with who I was in Christ and what he desired for me in the future. Jesus spoke clearly to me through John 14:18, assuring me that in everything I had to deal with—in every question, in every failure—I was not alone! Today, many years later, I still sometimes have doubts, fears, and struggles, but God is just as faithful today as he was when I was a teenager. I am not alone!

*I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you. (John 14:18 KJV)*

### MARILYN LEFEVRE (NEW JERSEY)

Over the last few years, the words of Jesus in John 15 have made a huge impact on my life. Knowing who I am not allows me the freedom to be who I am. I am not the gardener, not the vine, not the sap, and not the fruit. I am called to be a branch, humbly abiding in the vine. I am kept, loved, cared for, and forgiven. I am his and he is mine.

*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing. (John 15:5 NKJV)*

### GIOVANY (COLOMBIA, SOUTH AMERICA)

Jeannine Brabon tells how Giovany, a prisoner in Bellavista Prison, tore a page from the Bible to wrap his drug for a smoke. Before he lit the paper, however, the words of 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 leaped off the page! He sought the counsel of another prisoner who he knew was a believer and was led to confess his sins, renounce his evil lifestyle, and trust in Jesus. Now, twenty-five years later, Giovany is out of prison and leads a ministry to homosexuals, transvestites, and prostitutes in Medellin, Colombia.

*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–11)*

### KATY KEY (MICHIGAN)

It seems that sorrows and losses often come in multiples. One hurt is compounded by another hardship, which is made worse by yet another grief. At times during the past five years, life has felt that way to me. My soul found real freedom, however, when I discovered that Paul, at one point in his life, felt the very same way! His words in 2 Corinthians 1:8–10 have been used by the Spirit to bring me courage and hope time after time.

*For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly*

*burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. (2 Corinthians 1:8–10)*

### GEORGE SMALL (OHIO)

As a teen, while trying to lead a youth meeting, I felt God’s call into full-time Christian ministry. My response was, “Are you sure, Lord? This youth meeting is not going well at all! If I can’t do this simple task, how can I do greater ones?” Seven years later, as I was being ordained, while holding an open Bible in my hands, my eyes fell on 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24. It changed everything!

*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful: he will surely do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24)*

### CHARLIE FISKEAUX (KENTUCKY)

In 1984 as I was working at American Airlines, I wrestled about leaving my position to return to Christian higher education. Counseling with my peers was unhelpful, with not a single person advising me that the move made sense. One morning as I was pondering the decision, Hebrews 11:24–26 shot like a bolt through my mind. Taking this as the Lord’s direction, I returned to Asbury College as the business officer and remained there until I retired thirty-one years later.

*By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. (Hebrews 11:24–26)* 🙏

### *Eat this Book* continued from page 5

sweet as honey in your mouth; but it will also be bitter to your stomach. You can’t reduce this book to what you can handle; you can’t domesticate this book to what you are comfortable with. You can’t make it your toy poodle, trained to respond to your commands.

This book makes us participants in the world of God’s being and action; but we don’t participate on our own terms. We don’t get to make up the plot or decide what character we will be. This book has generative power; things happen to us as we let the text call forth, stimulate, rebuke, prune us. We don’t end up the same. Eat this book, but also have a well-stocked cupboard of Alka-Seltzer and Pepto-Bismol at hand. 🙏

### *What the Bible Says about Itself* continued from page 2

These two passages taken together indicate that during the time of the writing of the New Testament documents, there was an awareness that *additions* were being made to this special category of writings called “scripture,” writings that had the character of being God’s very words. Thus, once we establish that a New Testament writing belongs to the special category “scripture,” we are correct in applying 2 Timothy 3:16 to that writing as well and saying that that writing also has the characteristic Paul attributes to “all scripture”: It is “God-breathed,” and all its words are the very words of God. 🙏

*The Message in a Bottle* continued from page 1

Others decided to take a rational, scientific approach. “We will wait for a final report from our wise men and scholars,” they said. “Then we will decide what we believe.” However, the scholars couldn’t agree with each other and their academic jargon made them difficult to understand. Using “textual criticism,” they spoke of multiple “sources” and claimed that “redactors” had authored the messages. Because they had no access to the original autographs, most scholars felt the messages were therefore inauthentic. One group of scholars focused only on the ink that had been used to write the messages, spending years analyzing its composition. Others found defects in the artistic quality of the bottles and thus described the messages as “pseudepigraphal.”

Yet another group labored to give a natural explanation to the phenomena. “Our own island ancestors must have written these messages. They apparently believed there were other islands beyond the horizon inhabited by people who needed help. They wrote these messages many years ago to encourage them—but now the bottles have floated back to us!”

Other islanders, feeling themselves superior to those who passionately took sides over such nonsense, proudly said, “We have decided not to decide.” Closing their eyes to the data and pretending the messages in the bottles were no concern of theirs, this group looked down their noses at everyone else.

However, a few on the island took the messages seriously. They concluded that someone, somewhere was trying to communicate something very important. The messages resonated deeply in their souls, awakening a yearning for something they couldn’t quite explain. “We knew there had to be something beyond the horizon, but we couldn’t find words to explain it,” they said. “We realize now that our problem is homesickness! Someone across the sea loves us and wants to help us find our way home, a place much bigger and better than this small island.”

Most of the other islanders laughed at this group of believers and treated them with condescension. Yet, such persecution only caused them to grow stronger in their faith and bolder in their witness. On Sunday mornings, they would build a bonfire on the beach and gather to sing songs of deliverance and encourage one another. They would read again the messages that had come in the bottles. The words had an amazing ability to inspire faith, hope, and love in the hearts of those who listened. As they met, they would look toward the eastern horizon wondering if this might be the day their deliverance would finally come.†

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This issue of *The High Calling* is devoted to the topic of the Bible, God’s “message in a bottle” to all people on planet Earth. The parable above is the best way I know to introduce the theme. Today, not only our culture, but even the church, has forgotten the revolutionary power of God’s Word. God has sent us a message; he has spoken! Oh, that our ears might be open to hear what he has to say. 🙏

† The idea for this parable comes from the author Walker Percy (1916–1990), who used the metaphor of islanders who discover a message in a bottle to advance his theory of language (semiotics). See his book of essays, *The Message in the Bottle* (1975). As a Christian himself, Percy understood that the gospel is news from across the sea. Though Percy gets credit for the idea, the story and description is my own.

*When Scripture Is Offensive* continued from page 6

(Col. 2:14). But when that happens, the gospel raises us up with Christ and gives us new power for holy living.

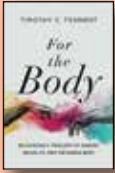
Christians must clearly communicate the difference between a position and a posture. A theological position is not, in itself, either gracious or mean-spirited. However, the way in which a person expresses that position can be either gracious or mean-spirited. Peter uses words like *gentleness* and *respect* in 1 Peter 3:15 to remind us to have a gracious, irenic posture when we express our positions. Many Christian “positions” are inherently offensive to the world, and even to some in the church. For instance, the statement “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6) is offensive to many people. Likewise, positions on God’s final judgment, the blood of Jesus, or Scripture’s teaching that marriage is a lifetime covenant between one man and one woman are all difficult positions in today’s cultural climate. However, it is a categorical error to identify these positions as inherently mean-spirited or unkind. They are *positions*, not *postures*. We must oppose the accusation that we are not kind and loving or that we are “engaging in hate speech” simply because we hold scriptural *positions* that are at odds with culture around us. But we must seek to communicate what we believe in a positive way that affirms the dignity of individuals and shows respect for those who disagree with us. 🙏

*Make Me a Captive, Lord!* continued from page 7

to follow societal norms and values, irrespective of their origins and goals. To allow our ideas and values to become controlled by anything or anyone other than the self-revelation of God in Scripture is to adopt an ideology rather than a theology; it is to become controlled by ideas and values whose origins lie outside the Christian tradition—and potentially to become enslaved to them.

The example of the German church under Hitler is instructive in that it points to the need for a criterion by which the church can judge the secular world. A theology which is grounded in values, whether radical or conservative, drawn solely from the secular world becomes powerless to criticize that world. A theology grounded in German culture thus found itself without any credible means to criticize that culture when it turned nasty. What was once believed to be liberating turned out to be decidedly menacing and sinister. It is significant that it was theologians such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who refused to look for God anywhere other than in Jesus Christ, who provided the most serious and thoughtful opposition to the culture wars waged by the Third Reich. 🙏





## For the Body

By Timothy C. Tennent

**\$22.95 (hardback; 255 pages)**

In *For the Body*, author Timothy Tennent looks at what it means to be created in the image of God and how our bodies serve as icons that illuminate God's purposes. Tennant examines topics like marriage, family, singleness, and friendship, and he looks at how the human body has been objectified in art and media today. He also offers a framework for discipling people today in a Christian theology of the body.



## Jesus Is Enough

By Linda Boyette

**Paperback; 154 pages; \$10.95**

Linda Boyette expected God to give her all her heart's desires: beauty, ministry, and music. As she faithfully followed Christ, she found herself disappointed and disillusioned when God sent her to a farm in the middle of Ohio with mud, messes, and mules. Linda began to spiral into a place of pain and despair, and it was at this point that Jesus came to meet her. He asked her one simple question, "Linda, am I enough for you?" This book is the story of her journey to understanding that *Jesus is Enough!* He is enough for the needs of every day, enough for the changes and transitions of life; enough in all of life's sorrows and pain.

## What Can I Take with Me?

By Charlie Fiskeaux, Special Assistant to the President for Financial Affairs

A part of being human is to be temporal. We know that when we die, all "things" associated with our earthly existence will be left behind. For some, leaving everything in which they have invested all their energy over the period of their life is cause for anxiety. Persons who have invested in right living bequeath an (intangible) heritage of righteousness to those following.

The Apostle John tells us, "blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they are blessed indeed, for they will rest from their hard work; for their good deeds follow them!" (Rev. 14:13 NLT). For the Christ-follower who has invested their temporal energy and assets in the spiritual dimension of our Lord's kingdom, there is the joy of having our "good deeds" follow us to the other side. That should bring a sense of peace and satisfaction to us.

Do you want to have good possessions on the other side? Then invest your time and assets accordingly on this side. The Francis Asbury Society purposes to be an organization worthy of your spiritual investments, by proclaiming the message of Scriptural holiness so that persons are transformed to live wholly devoted to God.

Details for various methods of giving to the ministries the Francis Asbury Society are available on the website <http://www.francisasburysociety.com/support>.

Sign up to receive our companion e-newsletter, *Ministry Matters*, at [www.francisasburysociety.com](http://www.francisasburysociety.com)

**The High Calling—May–June 2021**  
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# The High Calling

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