

Introducing Christianity
Exploring the Bible, Faith, and Life

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Introduction

This book began as a class I offered, called “Christianity 101.” I pitched it as “Most of what you might remember if you went to seminary or got a Masters degree in religion.” I was stunned when more than 500 registered, and excerpts appeared weekly in *The Charlotte Observer*. Church members, college students, and even unchurched people came, and have come to sessions I have led over the years since—which tells me that both inside and outside the Church, people are hungry to know about God, to know about the Bible, and to explore things spiritual. Yet they also crave a faith that is intellectually substantial, not just frivolous, a faith that is not superficial or merely presumed, but weighed thoroughly, shaken, and fully owned in real life.

SPIRITUAL PEOPLE

Once upon a time, religious people made a lot of assumptions that nowadays we would regard as embarrassingly naive. It was assumed that the average person in Western civilization was a Christian, that Christianity was this self-evident body of truth with which people were familiar, that questions were out of order. But if those days ever truly existed, they are long gone, never to return—which is not to say that people are no longer interested in God. On the contrary: we are keenly interested in God and in the spiritual life, and we would like to learn more, to experience in a real way what the life of faith is all about. We need more, deep inside. Merely to have a pulse and function in the world of business and play cannot begin to satisfy us. But what exactly is this yearning we always feel for *more*?

Polls suggest that 98 percent of Americans believe in God. But aren't a lot of them fudging a bit? Shouldn't there be a gray box, between “Yes I believe” and “No I don't,” indicating “Well yes, but deep inside, on some dark nights, I kind of wonder.” Or we believe in God, but we struggle to find meaningful connections between traditional Christianity and

our own personal sense of who God is. Perhaps we aren't all that clear on what Christianity is all about in the first place. We may have napped through Sunday school. There's a Bible someplace in the house, gathering dust. Perhaps we have walked in and out of various churches with differing angles on faith, and we feel a bit perplexed, or we have decided that theology is only a matter of personal opinion. The Internet, television, and shifting demographics have exposed us to women and men of other faiths. And then, if we manage to get a tidy theological system constructed, some surprise, some tragedy, crashes down on top of what we thought we believed, and we are left standing in the ruins, dazed.

This book is an exploration of Christianity designed for thinking, questioning people, a simplified version of the curriculum, if you will. I think you will find three kinds of things in its pages. First, I'll make a case for the Bible without denying the messiness of its formation and transmission. And I'll weed through some of the craziness in the history of the Church to notice the good in what the church has taught and believed over two thousand years. Fortunately, we do not have to start from scratch to figure out what God is about. Although we may be puzzled by many things that are ancient or medieval, it still is a virtue that Christianity is something old, something we receive, something not all that private. There is a sadness, a tragedy, in reducing the things of God to nothing more than my opinions, my warm, fuzzy (or dark) pious feelings. How unlikely that one person's private ruminations are in fact the truth about anything rightly called God! And worse, how lonely! I don't want to believe by myself; I want to believe with others, in community.

There are some very basic things that have always been true for Christians. At times there are disagreements in interpretation, but they are not as monstrous as we imagine. John Wesley suggested that we "keep close to the grand scriptural doctrines."

There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even sincere children of God (such is the present weakness of human understanding) are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may "agree to disagree." But, meantime, let us hold fast the essentials of "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" . . . strongly insisted on, at all times, and in all places.¹

Second, we will explore material that is simply fascinating. Admittedly I will include stories and quotations and issues that I personally think are interesting, and I trust you will too. If the Bible, or life in the

Church, or theology has ever seemed boring to you, then either you haven't been paying attention, or somebody else is hiding the full story from you. We will look at people and conversations and books and great turning points in history. Some of the story is funny. Some is shocking. Some will move you to tears.

Third, we will explore some very hard questions about God, faith, the Bible, the Church. God knows we have good questions. Could Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims all be wrong for all these centuries? We pick up on rumblings about archaeological excavations and scrolls unearthed and research undertaken that calls into question those seemingly obvious truths in the Bible. We've really wondered all along about Adam and Eve, an ark, walking on water, the blind suddenly given sight, not to mention an empty tomb.

THE QUESTION ASKED

Questions unaddressed lead to cynicism. We are a cynical people. We are cynical about our culture, about our institutions, and certainly about Christianity. In the name of God, preachers have bilked noncynical believers out of hard-earned money. Christians have gone to war in God's name, slaughtering foreigners. Christians line up on issues like homosexuality or abortion and spew venom at one another. The Church has majored in triviality and minored in irrelevance. Many churches are nothing more than nice places for nice people to do nice things with other nice people. Religious leaders let themselves be used by politicians. Despite its rhetoric, the Church is our most segregated institution. Hypocrites are perched on every pew. No wonder we're cynical about religion.

Our great hope rests in thinking through our questions, and this book wrestles with quite a few. Meaning unfurls itself, not merely in the answer that is given, but in the question asked, at least in the drama of our lives. We are eager to explore any and every kind of knowledge that bears on the religious life. Sadly, in our culture, we often segregate faith from knowledge, as if knowledge is anti-faith, as if faith deals with those zones that are irrational or merely mysterious. But faith and knowledge are like sisters. The title of Jean LeClerc's book on medieval monasticism, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, captures what has traditionally been a single endeavor for God's people searching for meaning.

As Christians, we need fear nothing that is true. In fact, we welcome, we pursue truth wherever it may be found, knowing that God is truth, and that truth sets us free. I take personal comfort in one of Simone Weil's shrewd thoughts from her autobiography. She ironically suggests that "one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth."

Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.²

Theologians should be, above all people, finally and utterly humble. If we see our subject at all, we see through a glass darkly. To talk of God most assuredly tangles us up in logical inconsistencies. And instead of rallying with Churchill's bon mot, "I would rather be right than consistent," we admit that we are attempting the impossible, to talk of God. If we think we are able to do so with great accuracy we fool no one. Once we reflect on our inability to understand God with masterful comprehension, or to speak of God with crystal clarity, we notice in our inability a curious testimony to the greatness and wonder of God. If God is God, we would expect to be puzzled, awestruck, mystified, and then dizzied with delight; we brush the mere hem of God's garment, and yet the garment is splendid enough. Certainties are there, yet we always test those with questions, and knowledge from every quarter.

ILLUSION AND REALITY

Hard questions—challenging what we really mean by faith, who Jesus really was, and what reality is all about—can be threatening. But like an athlete shedding a few pounds and mastering some moves, the theological thinker must let sweet theological illusions be swept aside and arrive at a harder-won but more substantial belief that is honest, profound, and certainly humble. As we listen in on what the great spiritual masters have taught and prayed and done, we sense that our bland, tame version of Christianity must be chopped up like firewood, as we hope for some spark to set us on fire. For in Christianity there is no thinking or learning for merely intellectual purposes. We learn and know so we might understand and believe, and thereby find our lives irrevocably altered. Christianity isn't a head game, and it isn't just a

“feeling.” Jesus did not come so that we could *feel* different, but so that we could *be* different.

This business of “being different” is my primary interest here. Like a lot of people, I had a spotty upbringing when it came to church. Generally the Christianity I heard about was a curious blend of the harsh and judgmental with the emotional, and it just turned me off. A faith vital and yet intellectually coherent seemed impossible. My education was in science, and then philosophy. I have had and continue to have constant questions and doubts about the Bible, about God, about the Church, about the life of faith. But now I know that questions and doubts are not the twin pillars at the shrine of atheism and evil, but rather are the path more and more people cannot help but take if they are to move toward or be found by God. As a minister, I spend time daily with people who are cynical about things religious, and as counsel I sometimes refer to these wise words from Mark Helprin: “All great discoveries are products as much of doubt as of certainty, and the two in opposition clear the air for marvelous accidents.”³ I want to share my certainty, some marvelous accidents that I see.

We need a marvel or two in our titillating but hollow world. Imagine you are among those sailors of mythological times, laboring hard in rough seas, drifting off course. In the wind you hear seductive songs, those sirens luring you and your mates on, yet you suspect the destination is nothing but shipwreck. But then there is one on board, Orpheus, who picks up his lyre and begins playing a tune, a sweet melody, one so beautiful that you no longer notice the sirens. And you follow that song, and manage to row to safety.

The Church forgets the beauty of its song. Fearing the incursions of the culture, preachers and theologians assert dogmatic truths, such as “The Bible is the Word of God!” However true, such declarations fall on deaf ears, and the ship continues to list toward the rocks of destruction. I believe that if we really listen to the song, to what Christianity is about, and if we deal with our questions, and continue to listen, we will be enthralled by the song and not be lured away from God. We can live and even thrive.

WHERE WE’RE GOING

So this book is an introduction, an exploration of Christianity. Perhaps the material is new to you, and you have never thought a lot about the

Bible and theology and life. Perhaps all this is familiar, but I think the approach and the questions raised will keep it fresh. We will ask three basic questions: What is the Bible about? What is Christianity about? What is the Christian life about?

When we think about the Bible, we will ask how we go at reading the Bible and what we may expect to find and what we will never find. We'll see what the Old Testament has to say and try to make some sense out of all those commandments, sacrifices, kings, and wars. Then we'll turn to what the New Testament can tell us, probing closely into the identity and significance of Jesus. When we consider what Christianity is about, we will look at the history of the Church, its triumphs, its foibles; we will study how theologians over twenty centuries have reasoned out our beliefs; and then we will attempt a basic sketch of what Christians believe. When we explore the Christian life, we will survey how faith is put into practice; we will dare to analyze the unique places we stand on moral, ethical issues; and we will paint a picture of what life is like in community, together in the Church and world with other people.

And at the end, we will talk about "the end," our future, God's future. Perhaps the most significant accomplishment of Christianity throughout its history is its persistent lifting up of a substantial hope to people who previously believed there was no hope. Frederick Buechner put it beautifully: "Hope is the driving power and outermost edge of faith. Hope stands up to its knees in the past, and keeps its eyes on the future."⁴

PART I

The Bible

1

Scripture

Scrolls in Old Jars

The Bible is the swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ is laid.
—Martin Luther

One day, back in 1947, a young bedouin shepherd named Jum'a Muhammad Khalil was passing the time by tossing stones into cave openings in the cliff. One stone, cast into the dark, made a surprising clattering sound. Climbing into the cave, he and a friend found several old clay jars. Inside those crusty, reddish pottery jars were stunningly preserved rolls of parchment that we now know as the celebrated Dead Sea Scrolls. More jars were found, more scrolls unfurled, one a full manuscript of the book of Isaiah that is on display now in a museum in Jerusalem. With some imagination you can picture the young man Jesus opening just such a scroll to read in the synagogue of Nazareth. Another scroll turned out to be the Psalms, which must have functioned like a hymnal or prayer book for the Jews who lived and prayed out in that desert. More jars, more scrolls: Genesis, 1 Samuel, Jeremiah.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Bible is like a bunch of scrolls rolled up and preserved in old jars. We are mistaken to conceive of the Bible as a fully finished book, bound in leather with goldleaf, dropped down out of heaven onto our coffee tables or into our pulpits. Before the Bible was a book, it was a little library of books, written over many centuries, copied, unrolled, stored, treasured, altered, improved, checked, stored, studied, memorized, kissed, lived.

The language is strange. The New Testament was written in Greek, a kind of Greek so old that scholars who can read the Bible in Greek struggle with road signs and menus in Athens. The Old Testament, like those Dead Sea Scrolls, was written in Hebrew, a language that to us seems backwards, reading right to left, with the front of the book at the back, which turns out to be the real front. Reading it may persuade us that we are living our lives backwards, that we should do things differently.

The books in that library are not all alike. Some are big, some little. Some are dramatic, some dull. Some tell stories, some repeat ancient rules. Some bear sweeping narratives, some collect poetry and songs. Too many Christians handle the Bible as if it were a Ouija board, or an answer book, chock-full of orders and commands from on high. But as you read the Bible, you find stories: earthy, humorous, even bizarre. There are love poems and plenty of songs; there are pithy little sayings and some longer sermons. We see people trying to figure God out and struggling to get along with their neighbors. God didn't dictate every word or drop it down from a cloud. The process was more elusive, and more real. The results are imperfect, yet more than good enough. The pictures, colors, and shapes of the Bible, if we look carefully enough, are the greatest images we have in our exploration of God.

Somehow it all comes together in something like a great mural. Up close, you see various details. At a distance, you see the big picture, and what is portrayed is an alluring adventure, life in the world with God. This is why it is misleading to zoom in or hang very much on a single verse. The Bible wasn't written a verse at a time; no one slivered off segmented verses until modern times. To look at a single verse is akin to thinking a single brush stroke is a painting, when that stroke is merely one of thousands deftly arranged in the artist's genius for a grander total effect.

CORRECTIVE LENSES

Let us shift the image a little. Many theologians have thought of the Bible as a good pair of corrective lenses. We have this astigmatism, spiritually speaking, and the Bible corrects our vision, focusing our eyes. The Bible, then, is not something we look *at*. The Bible is something we look *through*.¹

Or we might think of it like this: the Bible portrays a different paradigm for how to view reality. When Nicolaus Copernicus first suggested

that the earth was not located at the center of the universe, critics scoffed. But he had done a lot of looking up—at the stars, the planets, the moon—and he had figured out the earth was circling the sun. Once other watchers began looking at the skies from that perspective, more of what they saw made sense. Previously unexplained phenomena now fit neatly into the Copernican scheme.

Perhaps the Bible is like this discovery of Copernicus. Some people did a lot of looking up, or looking within. They contemplated what they had seen and heard in such depth that they began to understand the underlying order of things. And they couldn't keep it to themselves. They wrote it down, so we too could look up, and look within, and understand a deeper dimension of reality than is obvious to our normal senses. Previously unexplained phenomena in our lives now make sense as part of God's larger purpose.

So we sit up and take note of what the Bible is up to. Erich Auerbach compared the Bible and its mission with other classics in literature and noticed the Bible's tyrannical claim to truth: "Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history."² We may ask, "How is the Bible relevant to my world? How do I fit the Bible into my life?" But the Bible counters with a very different line of questioning: "How will you fit your life into the Bible? How can we make the world relevant to the one true world portrayed in the Bible?"

THE ORIGIN OF TRUTH

The very thought of this bold, almost arrogant claim is remarkable. We prefer to see ourselves as the adjudicators of truth. We decide for ourselves what is true, what matters. But we will never understand the Bible at all from this perspective. Truth is not something you figure out today for yourself. Truth precedes all of us, and claims us. Truth perseveres; it has some antiquity about it.

In our trendy, autonomous culture, such talk of truth may seem ridiculous. But as John Updike put it, "Laugh at ministers all you want, they have the words we need to hear, the ones the dead have spoken."³ Laugh if you will, but we highly educated modern people may prove to be the real laughingstock. My grandparents could be perfectly described by these words from Allan Bloom:

My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards, and my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich because all the things done in it . . . found their origin in the Bible's commandments, and their explanations in the Bible's stories. I do not believe that my generation, my cousins who have been educated in the American way, all of whom are M.D.s or Ph.D.s, have any comparable learning. When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing but clichés, superficialities, the material of satire.⁴

Bible reading itself can be superficial. One egregious error is when we begin to think that the Bible is literally divine, as if it were somehow more than a book. We do not worship the Bible. In one of his heated controversies with some religious folks who waved their Bibles at him, Jesus said:

You search the scriptures,
because you think that in them you have eternal life;
But they bear witness to me;
yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.
(John 5:39–40, au. trans.)

The Bible is not God, but tells us about God, or rather is the literary residue of people who knew God intimately. No better description of what we may expect to find in the Bible can be articulated than the introduction to one of its letters:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

(1 John 1:1–4)

If we poke around in those jars, unroll those scrolls, and explore the stories, poetry, prayers, and letters, we hear the plaintive voices of people mustering their best to tell what they had experienced of God. Their lives had been changed by God, and they wanted us to know about it, so that our lives too might be changed.

IMPERFECTION IN THE BIBLE

For this book, this collection of many books, to fulfill this function, must it be flawless? Again, this book was not etched in gold above the clouds, but began as stories passed on, by word of mouth, for centuries, and finally committed to parchment, copied, recopied—and we would be surprised if such a library were utterly consistent in every factual detail, if the memories of storytellers were photographic, if copyists and translators never erred. We would not mind, and a flawless book would certainly be interesting, unique among all books ever assembled. But perhaps in God's wisdom a human book is of greater usefulness than something superhuman. For we are human, and we understand our lives and God more clearly, more personally, more tangibly, through words and stories that are real, human, mundane, and even a little flawed, like ourselves. Jesus, after all, told us about God, embodied what God was about, by what he did with his body—a body that was not miraculously shielded from hunger or pain, a body not made of shimmering platinum, a body that no onlookers admired as perfect, a body capable of destruction. And it was precisely in his humanity that Christ revealed the purposes of God, whose Word to us is always hidden and simultaneously revealed in human words about God.

Karl Barth expresses this eloquently:

The promise of this Word is this: Emmanuel, God with us who have brought ourselves, and continually bring ourselves again, into the dire straits of not being able to be with God. Holy Scripture is the word of people who yearned, waited and hoped for this Emmanuel, and who finally saw, heard and handled it in Jesus Christ. . . . And this grasping and accepting of the promise: Emmanuel with us sinners, in the words of the prophets and apostles, this is the faith of the church.⁵

Indeed, this was why Luther could call the Bible “the swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ is laid.”

The Church has claimed that the Bible is “inspired.” And so it is. But it is important to understand exactly what we mean by inspired. The Bible is not inspired in the sense that God whispered the text into a scribe's ear who wrote it all down before it could be somehow tainted by humanity. Rather, the Bible is inspired because people responded to God's grace and left a witness so that others might learn about this God. And God called this witness good. God providentially guided this process, in much the same way that God nurtures the entire created

order, ensuring that it all finally serves God's own good ends. Generation after generation, for centuries, the Bible has led people back to God. It is uniquely through this witness that we may come to know God and have our lives changed. We have real, flesh-and-blood witnesses, whose lives were changed, and that is our hope, for we too are flesh and blood. If they were transformed, then we may be as well.

Now many worry about the admission that there may be even a single sentence in the entire Bible that is not factually correct. The fear is of the proverbial "slippery slope": if some statement in the Bible, however trivial it may seem, is construed as not historically exact, then we lose all trust in the Bible's most central declarations, such as the resurrection of Christ. But let us consider just one example. Luke is negotiating his way through the advent of Jesus and includes the detail that "this was . . . while Quirinius was governor of Syria." Herod clearly was the king, and we know from contemporary records that Herod died before Quirinius became governor. So do we throw out all of Scripture because of this error? Hardly.

One day I drove a couple of hours and took my father to lunch at a very fine restaurant. After the meal he asked why, and I replied "It's your seventieth birthday!" He chuckled and corrected me: it was only his sixty-ninth. A factual error! But did this mean I did not love my father, or that our relationship was bogus? If anything, the factual error became endearing. Love is like that. Absolutely nothing important depends on whether or not Quirinius was really the governor when Herod was king. Luke is writing a long lifetime later, with no Internet to research the matter, and the memories upon which he relied were off just a bit. Yet nothing in the substance of Christianity stands or falls on the matter. The error is itself endearing; God enters into the mortal stuff of our reality. But we need not conclude Jesus wasn't even born. Wasn't he born, even if Luke did not remember correctly whether Quirinius was governor then? Everything hinges upon the fact of birth, and no one could doubt that he was born. Did Jesus rise from the dead? We have no contemporary records to check, but clearly everything hinges on the truthfulness of the resurrection, and clearly all the biblical writers believed it. Indeed, they staked their lives on it.

TAKING THE BIBLE LITERALLY

Almost all factual confusion falls into the category of "Nothing of substance depends on it." Lots of other material in the Bible is clearly

intended *not* to be taken as literally “factual.” Jesus made up stories that were not “true.” Rather, his stories were true in the way only a fictional story can be true. “A man had two sons.” Jesus was not talking about a specific man with a name and address, whose sons had provable birth-dates. When the Bible says that God is a rock, the writer would be stunned if we asked how many tons this rock weighs.

When my daughters were young, I realized they could easily distinguish between historical fact and metaphor. One night I was reading aloud to them from C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—and I told them that Aslan, the wise lion, had died. Wasn’t it sad? The next day, I told them that their great-grandmother Stevens died—and they fully understood we’d be attending a funeral because her death was something fundamentally different from the mythic death of Aslan. Why can’t we read the Bible and grasp the vast gulf between “Jesus was tried and crucified by the Romans,” something obviously intended as a factual report, and “Jonah (whose name means ‘silly’) was swallowed by a fish (of which there are none large enough in the vicinity), lived for three days in its belly, was vomited onto the shore, walked to Nineveh (the Assyrian capital), preached and converted the whole city (although by what the rest of the Bible, as well as Assyrian records, tells us, the Ninevites persisted in lopping off heads and worshipping their moon god)”?

But even when the Bible reports what actually happened with Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, we bump into confusion. Jesus most certainly invaded the temple precincts one day and with physical zeal threw the money changers out. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this dramatic event during the last week of Jesus’ life, but John remarkably situates it at the very outset of Jesus’ career. We will say more about Jesus research, and what Jesus really said and did, in chapter 3. For now all we can and must say is that the Bible can be messy, just as life is messy. The narrative of the Bible just eludes our need to get it all managed and ordered. If God wanted it to be all straight and non-messy, there would be only one Gospel, instead of four, and there would be a tidy fit between the Bible story and what we know from contemporary sources. But God did not intend it to be so easy. The presentation of the story is human, just as we are human, just as Jesus was human. And how thankful we may be that God is revealed to us flawed people through such a book.

This view of inspiration is “functional” more than “ontological.” To say that the Bible is inspired does not mean it has some strange property, intrinsic to its pattern of ink on the page. Rather, its authority has

more of the force of a constitution,⁶ something that defines how a community of people will act, where the fences should be put up, how we approach reality in order to continue to be who we have been and must be. The epitome of what it means to be Scripture is described in 2 Timothy 3:16–17:

All scripture is inspired by God
and is useful for teaching,
for reproof, for correction,
and for training in righteousness,
so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient,
equipped for every good work.

Profitable, training, equipped—words that speak not of some property intrinsic to the book itself, but words that characterize a function, and a vital one in real life. The Bible is “inspired,” a word implying that God breathes life into it, invigorating it, deploying it, with no intent to boast of its own grandeur, caring only that you and I get reprovved, corrected, trained, equipped.

Christians have therefore always clung to the sufficiency of Scripture. Not always to the exclusivity of Scripture, but to its sufficiency, as declared in the *Westminster Confession*: “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; to which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” We might hear this last point, “nothing is to be added,” as narrow, limiting. But there is something liberating about the fact that whatever is necessary is already in Scripture, that it functions like a “constitution,” surely in need of interpretation, but not to be superseded or invalidated. For otherwise we are subjected to every trend and whim of culture, every novel theological thought, floating directionless with no mooring.

MIRROR OF THE SOUL

You can know a lot about the Bible, yet not be changed by it. Just over a century ago, Charles Marson wrote a humorous book entitled *Huppim, Muppim, and Ard*. Even the most devoted fundamentalist might

have difficulty recognizing this trio as the three sons of Benjamin. Marson attacked the kind of religious education that focuses children on the minutiae of Scripture:

These children can tell you who Huppim and Muppim and Ard were; they know the latitude of Beersheba, Keriioth and Beth-gamal; they can tell you who slew a lion in a pit on a snowy day; they have ripe views upon the identity of Nathanael and St. Bartholomew; they can name the destructive miracles, the parables peculiar to St. Luke, and, above all, they have a masterly knowledge of St. Paul's second missionary journey. They are well loaded and ballasted with chronicles of Baasha and Zimri, Methuselah and Alexander the Copper-smith. . . . Therefore while our clergy are . . . instant in season and out of season . . . to proclaim the glories of Huppim and Muppim, the people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. . . . They know all about Abraham except the way to his bosom, all about David except his sure mercies, and all about St. Paul except the faith which he preached and which justified him.⁷

It is at this point of usefulness that we might draw back. The Bible's world seems strange, an impossible fit for the mundane realities of life in our world. Cardinal John Henry Newman recognized this feeling of being alienated from the world of the Bible when he wrote: "I consider . . . that it is not reason that is against us, but imagination. The mind, after having lived to the utter neglect of the Gospels, in science, on coming back to Scripture, encounters an utter strangeness in what it reads."⁸ The unreasonableness of the Bible is an affront to us. It challenges the way that we think about the world.

On the other hand, we can choose to have our lives grasped by the Bible. Stanley Fish put it this way: "In our postures as seekers, after meaning or after Christ (they are, of course, the same), we place ourselves outside a system to make sense of it, to fit its parts together; what we find is that the parts are already together and that we are one of them, living in the meaning we seek—in Him, we live and move and have our being."⁹ Maybe if we would stop trying to step out of the story of the Bible and stand at a distance from it, and rather try to make its world our world, some of the utter strangeness of the Bible might disappear. And we might begin to look a little strange to our neighbors, and to ourselves.

For in the Bible we learn not only about God, but about ourselves. Back in the fourth century, St. Athanasius suggested that the Bible is like a mirror in which we learn the truth about ourselves, in the light of

the God who made us, calls us, and destines us for life. John Calvin called the Psalter “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul,” for “there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”¹⁰ We need not expect to find mere confirmation of what we think we already know about ourselves. Like a surgeon, probing deep into the marrow of who I am, the Bible exposes the deepest truth about me: that I am a child of God, made in God’s image, a sinner, one who needs not what Madison Avenue dictates that I shall need (and buy), one desperate for the grace and mercy of God—and that my handicap in receiving that grace is precisely my sense of achievement and merit, which I cherish so deeply. We assume we know what we need, and hope the Bible bears something to satisfy that need. To our surprise, the Bible mercifully informs us that what we thought we needed we did not need at all, and that we have more profound, stranger needs, which lure us toward an unanticipated adventure with God.

THE STRANGER ASKING QUESTIONS

And so how do we read the Bible? We need not hunt for ammunition to fight the battles in which we are already engaged. Charles Schulz, of *Peanuts* fame, sketched a cartoon where a young man, engrossed in his Bible, says to a friend, “Don’t bother me: I’m looking for a verse of Scripture to back up one of my preconceived notions.” It’s such a pleasure to wrap a Bible verse around *my* bias, or to fire off a verse like a bullet at some foe. God did not oversee the development of the Bible so that we would have a stash of ammunition to fire at somebody. Rather, its target seems to be me.

When I was in seminary, on the first day of Old Testament theology, my professor, Roland Murphy, thundered a question my way: “James, is the Bible inspired?” I nervously squeaked, “Yes, sir.” He probed further: “Why?” Lacking a well-conceived reply, I resorted to humor: “Well, I find that very often the Bible agrees with what I think.” A few in the class chuckled, except for a woman sitting next to me. Annoyed, she reproached me: “I disagree! I find that the Bible is inspired at precisely those points where it disagrees with what I think.” The class was

silenced—but my friend from the back of the room bailed me out by asking her, “Oh yeah? What about those passages that say women shouldn’t speak in church?”

Our method in this book is to ask questions, and when we read the Bible, we need to be full of questions. There are no bad questions, none to be hushed up. But we know that when we inquire into the Bible, the hardest questions will not be our own, but rather those coming back at us, as we sense what T. S. Eliot meant when he said, “Beware the Stranger who comes asking questions.” The woman in my class was right: we look for God’s Word at precisely those points where the Bible disagrees with us, challenges us, questions us.

Mark Twain once said that he was most bothered, not by the parts of the Bible he couldn’t understand, but by the parts he could understand. There is nothing easy about doing what clearly and frequently recurs in the Bible. Jim Wallis tells about an exercise some seminary students did a few years ago. They took scissors to a Bible and physically excised every passage that speaks about the poor. Major portions of the prophets, the Psalms, laws in Leviticus, the teachings of Jesus, and the epistles were snipped and clipped until the Bible was in shreds. Wallis called it the “holey Bible”!¹¹ Unwittingly we all snip away at portions we might prefer not to deal with and delight in those that bolster our preconceptions. But when we pick and choose passages we are fond of, isn’t this really an evasion of God’s claim on us, yet at the same time a superficial stab at pretending we are in sync with God’s ways?

So how do we read the Bible? One of the most remarkable moments in the history of Scripture being read had to be when Dietrich Bonhoeffer, armed at age twenty-five with both a doctorate in theology and wide acclaim, was surprisingly converted. He later wrote a letter to his girlfriend, Maria von Wedemeyer:

I plunged into work in a very unchristian way. An . . . ambition that many noticed in me made my life difficult. . . . Then something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible. . . . I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, spoken and preached about it—but I had not yet become a Christian. I know that at that time I turned the doctrine of Jesus Christ into something of personal advantage for myself. . . . I pray to God that will never happen again. Also I had never prayed, or prayed very little. For all my loneliness, I was quite pleased with myself. Then the Bible, and in particular the

Sermon on the Mount, freed me from that. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly, and so have other people about me.¹²

It is not that Bonhoeffer had not read the Bible before. His conversion came, rather, when he stopped reading the Bible *for* himself, and began to absorb what it had to say *against* himself, to let the words do their inexorable work of judging, altering, even demolishing, reshaping, perfecting, flowering.

LEARNING TO READ

Reading the Bible requires time, repetition, practice. While we may not be able to decipher Hebrew or Greek, the thought and worldview of the Bible seem strange, alien to our own. When we learn a foreign language, our first attempts at reading are awkward, excruciating, confused; but over time we begin to get it, to make sense of it, even to delight in the flow of the language. We need not expect the Bible to divulge its mysteries through a quick glance at a verse or passage. We read, and read more, and immerse ourselves in the rhythm of the Bible's life. We begin to think the way the Bible thinks, that is, to see our lives and all of reality from God's perspective. We notice, understand, and begin to mimic the movements and speeches of the characters in the stories of the Bible. We learn to pray its prayers and yearn for its hope.

Scholarship may be of help to us; and then again, scholarship may do us no good at all. Beyond question, educated people have rifled through ancient manuscripts, learned of the oddities of ancient cultures, dug up ancient cities, sifted information, and asked exceedingly hard questions about the texts that make up the Bible. As far as possible we need to learn all we can from those fine scholars who have done such yeoman detective work for us all. Robert Jenson has wisely said that "discovery and exploration of the oral and literary processes that eventuated in the Gospels beneficently *complicate* our involvement with the Gospel texts."¹³ We tend to romanticize and oversimplify the Bible, and scholars can debunk some of our foolish notions and banish a lot of nonsense we would unwittingly read into the text.

And yet the very enterprise of studying may put us in a mood that inhibits us from getting out of the Bible what is intended for us. We distance ourselves and objectify the text, treating the Bible as a fascinating object to be debated and analyzed, but perhaps never actually lived out.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard sarcastically declared that “Christian scholarship is the human race’s prodigious invention to defend itself against the New Testament, to ensure that one can continue to be a Christian without letting the New Testament come too close.”¹⁴

For the spirit required is one of humility, not intellectual mastery, an attitude Calvin called *docilitas*, a meek, “teachable” spirit. Describing his own conversion, Calvin said:

At first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion, subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.¹⁵

Reading the Bible is all about desire—desire for God, desire to make progress, desire to be different, desire to act differently.

THE LIVING OF IT

Acting differently. We have misconstrued religion as something “spiritual,” something merely in the mind, God being something like an idea. But God is far more than an idea, and religion confined to the mind is not the religion portrayed in the Bible. The Bible is all about real life, and until we begin to embody what the Bible is talking about, curiously enough we will never understand it. St. Athanasius put it well:

For the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word. One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life. Anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must . . . approach the saints by copying their deeds.¹⁶

This doesn’t mean you have to be totally holy before you can understand anything in the Bible. But it does mean that the Bible, when properly comprehended, issues in altered patterns of behavior. The most solid

Bible interpretation is found on no printed page, but rather in the real lives of Christians. Scripture is holy, and we know it is genuinely understood when its readers become holy.¹⁷

For if faith has any truth to it, then faith must be lived, embodied, practiced. To do theology in this way requires that we speak of exemplars, heroes, saints, and we will say more about them in chapter 4. But for now, let us begin at the beginning, and unroll and examine the contents of those jars discovered by the bedouin shepherd, the first cluster of books in the library called the Bible: the Old Testament.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What terms would you use to describe the Bible? What does the Bible mean to you?
2. Why is it important to recognize that the Bible has come to us through the writings of humans and is not a book “etched in gold above the clouds”?
3. In what ways does reading the Bible alter your patterns of thinking? Of living?