

Title: The Bible: Reliable, radical and relevant
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The Christian faith involves both doctrine and experience; it has objective and subjective dimensions. But the foundation of our faith is not a set of normative experiences. The foundation is a body of beliefs, the Old and New Testament Scriptures, the "apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42), or as Jude puts it, "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints," (Jude 3).

This is what maintains unity and orthodoxy within the wide spectrum of churches that take the name "Christian." Meddle with the fundamentals of the faith, and the power drains out of your spiritual life, and you find yourself in a Christian cult rather than a Christian church: a very dangerous development.

The Bible is Reliable

While creeds, confessions, conciliar declarations and constitutional statements may be a useful guide or summary of biblical doctrines, ultimately the Bible alone is a sure guide for personal and corporate faith and conduct.

The Bible is a historically reliable collection of documents. F.F. Bruce says, "by the singular care and providence of God the Bible text has come down to us in such substantial purity that even the most uncritical edition of the Hebrew and Greek, or the most incompetent or even the most tendentious translation of such an edition, cannot effectively obscure the real message of the Bible or neutralise its saving power."

Two passages are particularly important in identifying the internal evidence for the Bible's reliability: 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21. The first states the fact of inspiration; the second gives us a glimpse of the process.

People today look to many sources and authorities to find meaning and fulfilment in life. We all want to be happy and find fulfilment in life. Some of us look for happiness by acquiring possessions, or experiencing pleasure, or gaining prestige and power, or by seeking alternative realities. But real happiness comes from understanding my purpose in life: why I am here. And the best way to find my purpose is to connect with my Creator.

Francis Schaeffer said, "Man, made in the image of God, has a purpose—to be in relationship with God, who is there. Man forgets his purpose and thus he forgets who he is and what life means."

Timothy, the young colleague of the Apostle Paul, found his purpose in life through the godly influence of his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois, and through the knowledge of Scripture they introduced to him. Timothy was blessed by being the son of a Jewish mother who taught him to memorize and understand the Old Testament Scriptures. How well are we doing in that area of life? It takes discipline, but it's worth the effort.

Why was Scripture so important to Timothy? Why is it so important for us? I want to suggest three reasons drawn from this passage. First, Scripture is of fundamental importance to us because what Scripture says, God says! "All Scripture is God-breathed" (verse 16a). The Bible is reliable: it is the word of God written. It is unique, dependable, trustworthy—because it is "underwritten" by God. As the great medical missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, put it, "There is a living God. He has spoken in the Bible. He means what he says and will do all he has promised."

Chuck Colson, who was jailed for his part in the Watergate break-in and who later founded Prison Fellowship, explains how he came to have a “high” view of Scripture. At first, the historical reliability of the Bible did not concern him, but he changed his mind as he saw the Bible's power to change the lives of prisoners:

My convictions have come, not from studies in Ivory Tower academia, but from life in what may be termed the front-line trenches, behind prison walls where Christians grapple in hand-to-hand combat with the prince of darkness. In our prison fellowships, where the Bible is proclaimed as God's holy and inerrant revelation, believers grow and discipleship deepens. Christians live their faith with power. Where the Bible is not so proclaimed ... faith withers and dies. Christianity without biblical fidelity is merely another passing fad in an age of passing fads.

The Bible has unparalleled power to change your life, and that power resides in the fact that it is the unchanging and trustworthy word of God.

The Bible is Radical

The second reason why Scripture is of fundamental importance to us is that it is the means God chose to reveal Christ to us, and to explain the way of salvation. Paul reminds Timothy "how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," (verse 15). No other world literature, no other religious faith, no other attempt to offer a solution to the problems of the human condition is able to penetrate our defences, and transform our lives, and bring us into a living relationship with the living God.

The Bible has a radical message for us! We were created to enjoy a personal relationship with God, but we naturally ignore God's principles for living and we try to live independently of his will for our lives. When our relationship with God is not right, we experience problems in every area of our lives—our marriage, career, relationships, finances. We lose our way, and we start to slide down the slippery slope toward destruction.

The Bible's radical message is that Jesus is the way to God. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me," (John 14:6). God himself came to earth as a human person to heal the broken relationship between us and God. Jesus has already solved your sin problem! God has done his part to restore our relationship to him. Now he waits for each of us to individually accept what he has done for us, and make it real in our lives.

What do I need to do, then, to find fulfilment and purpose in life? I admit that I have not given God first place in my life, and ask him to forgive my sins; believe that Jesus died to pay for my sins, and that he rose from among the dead on the first Easter Sunday, and is alive today; accept God's free gift of salvation; and invite Jesus to come into my life and become the Director (“Lord”) of my life.

When asked to sum up his understanding of biblical theology, the great 20th century German theologian Karl Barth said simply, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

The Bible is Relevant

Third, Scripture is of fundamental importance to us because it is useful. Timothy was Paul's virtual successor, and divine inspiration was a commonly accepted Jewish belief. Why, then, does Paul need, at this point in his letter, to remind Timothy of the fact of the inspiration of Scripture?

He was stating the obvious, and drawing attention to the usefulness of Scripture: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work," (verses 16-17).

In chapter 2:21, Paul has pointed out that the Christian leader is "made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work." Here, in contrast, Scripture is by nature holy, and is a unique and powerful tool to help believers achieve their work and fulfil their ministry. In order to grow, each of us needs to be taught, rebuked, corrected, trained in righteousness, and thoroughly equipped. And only the Bible is sufficient for it. The Bible is reliable, radical, and relevant to your needs!

Emile Cailliet was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. Unlike the biblical character Timothy, Cailliet had been raised in a secular environment and had never seen a Bible. World War I came, and as he sat in the trenches he found himself reflecting on the inadequacy of his worldview. He longed for what he called "a book that would understand me," but he knew of no such book.

After returning to his academic studies, he decided to prepare one secretly for his personal use. As he came across something that spoke to his condition, he copied it into a notebook, hoping the quotations, carefully indexed and numbered, would lead him from fear and anguish to release and jubilation.

At last the day came to read the finished product. He sat down under a tree and began to read his anthology, but he found to his disappointment that it carried no persuasion and only reminded him of the context of the passages and his research in finding them. He closed the book. At that very moment, his wife came by and told him she had stumbled across a Huguenot chapel, and had gone in and been given a Bible by the elderly pastor. She apologised to her husband for this, because she knew his feelings about the Christian faith.

But he was not listening to her apology. "A Bible, you say? Where is it? Show me," he said. And he began to read. Here is his description of what followed:

I opened it and 'chanced' upon the Beatitudes! I read, and read, and read—now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within. ... And suddenly the realization dawned upon me: This was the Book that would understand me! I continued to read deeply into the night, mostly from the Gospels. And lo and behold, as I looked through them, the One of whom they spoke, the One who spoke and acted in them, became alive to me. ... While it seemed absurd to speak of a book understanding a man, this could be said of the Bible because its pages were animated by the presence of the living God and the power of his mighty acts. To this God I prayed that night, and the God who answered was the same God of whom it was spoken in the Book.

The Book that understands you is waiting for you to read it, and the God who wrote it is waiting for you to discover him.

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