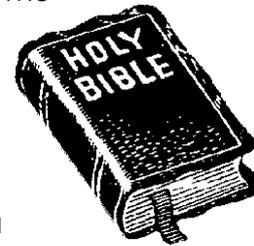


The Bible: What it is and what it isn't

Handling the Bible

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." – Apostle Paul, 2 Tim 2:15

In this passage, Paul warns Timothy to avoid 'quarrels about words' and 'godless chatter'. Instead, he must encourage a wholesome approach to the gospel and, no doubt, to the Scriptures, and so avoid controversy and quarrelling. Good advice! But how do we handle God's Word 'correctly', as Paul says?



Problems occur when we try to make the Bible perform a function it was never meant to have. It is the most amazing, most read, most powerful book in history – but to handle it correctly and in a healthy way we need to understand what it really is – and what it isn't.

Common approaches

The literal approach

'I take the Bible literally, wherever possible!' Often people think this is the safest and best way to approach Scripture. However, it leads to some very strange ideas – particularly when it relates to books like Revelation, with its fantastic beasts and lurid imagery! Without an appreciation of the different genres (types of writing) and cultural assumptions that shape the writers' understanding, we can get tied in knots in our thinking and, more seriously, into harmful error.

The legal approach

Some take the Bible as a book of laws to be obeyed. Not only does this give the wrong impression of God and the gospel, it produces a sad, pressured, guilty and frequently judgemental life. God does not intend his Word to function like that in our lives.



The doctrinal approach

Many Christians love to use the Bible to 'prove' their particular doctrinal position, not realising that equally intelligent and godly Christians have a completely different view, based on the same Bible. The Bible simply does not set out tidy, detailed and thorough definitions of doctrine. The major themes are clear enough, but detailed understanding and interpretation of these does seemingly vary from one passage or writer to another. The fact is, the books of the Bible were not written to explain doctrine but for various other purposes.

The bill of rights approach

The Bible does contain many wonderful promises, but these are not a list of guarantees that place a contractual obligation on God to do exactly what we want him to do in our specific circumstances! The approach of



some is that if you have a problem, you go through the 'contract' (the Bible) with a fine-tooth comb and find the promise that applies to your situation. You then have God cornered by his own word and he

must do what you need! But the Bible is not a contract of rights and guarantees that we can brandish under God's nose! He wants relationship based on love and trust, not a contractual one.

The instruction manual approach

According to this view, the Bible is the divine 'user manual' – a list of instructions for life and church organisation. However, in reality, the Bible does not present a clear picture on many issues. It does not specify what Christians should eat, or wear, or how to manage finances or organise ourselves as church. It does give some very good general advice, particularly to do with character, but leaves the details rather vague.

The science text-book approach

The Bible reflects the world-view of the people who wrote it. Their understanding of nature was limited – but that doesn't stop the Bible being God's Word. People sometimes try to force certain passages – e.g. Genesis 1 – to speak into the scientific field, but this was not what the original writers were trying to do, nor should we expect that.

The Bible is... a very long story

God could have given us a book of definitions of truth, lists of instructions or facts, but he didn't want to. Because God IS relationship he gave us a story of his interaction and relationship with real people in history in their culture. It comes in many different types of



literature, but it is a slowly unfolding love story – an appeal to relationship addressed to all of humanity. We can certainly see ourselves at various points in the story, but we must always keep in mind the big picture, not allowing ourselves to get too lost in the details.

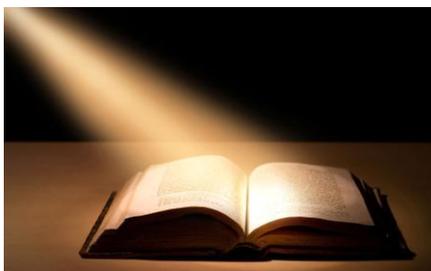
Perspicuity – how clear is the Bible, actually?

The idea of the 'perspicuity' (clarity) of the Bible is that it can speak to anyone, trained or not, so that God's message is understood clearly. However, on many issues, the Bible is not as clear as people think! That's one reason we have 9000 Christian denominations, all with slightly different understandings of what Scripture teaches in various areas. Whilst God's overall nature and broad message do come through clearly (when all of the Bible is taken into view), we need to realise that once we get down to the details it is possible for Bible-believing Christians to have sincerely held beliefs that are different to ours – apparently going against what we think the Bible 'clearly' teaches. So maybe 'perspicuity' only works at the general level, and we need to stay humble about our own opinions, even as we seek to understand better with the help of the Holy Spirit's leading.



So, how did 'inspiration' work?

Did the Holy Spirit 'possess' the Bible writers so that they were unaware of what they were doing as they wrote? Or did God take hold of their fingers and guide their hands on the page? No – the human authors of the various books of the Bible were writing intentionally, consciously, for specific reasons to specific people, and completely unaware that they were writing 'Scripture'. Their different personalities, priorities and viewpoints are visible in what they wrote. But, in a mysterious but quite



majestic way, God oversaw the whole project to give us the Bible he wanted us to have. This human side to Scripture doesn't prevent it from showing us God's will and his ways. Encouragingly, if God can use those imperfect human beings to represent him, he can use you too!

Inerrancy – really?

Before the 19th century, Christians were fairly united in believing the Bible to be God's Word, but never really spelled out what that meant. Then, during an onslaught of criticism from liberal theologians, some believers defended the Bible by insisting that every single word of the original

writings was perfect and free from all error. This 'inerrancy' view was an over-reaction but nevertheless caught on widely, especially in America. Many Christians today are starting to see the weaknesses with this view, which typically under-plays the human side to the Bible.

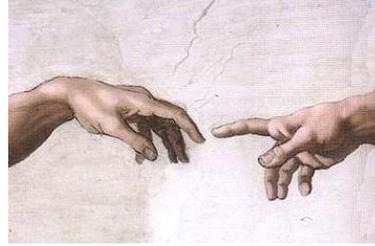
Discussion time...

Take some time to reflect on what we have covered so far, and together consider the following questions:

1. Which of the non-ideal approaches to the Bible, if any, reflect stages on your own journey? Do you need to adjust your thinking?
2. Can you think of possible theological reasons to argue FOR biblical inerrancy? Why is this important to some people?

Part 2: Handling the Bible well – a healthy approach

The Bible is a precious gift from God. We hold that it is authoritative, and that God speaks to us from it, individually and corporately. It is our main source of knowledge about God, and the key reference point for our practices and our doctrine. But it is a human book as well as a divine one. It has all the hallmarks of human writing – whilst being amazingly consistent in its general themes and showing a divine hand at work in its overall balance and message.



Don't get hung up on inerrancy

Is it really important that the original manuscripts of the Bible were free from every human error? All we have now are imperfect translations of copies of copies, and although we know with a very good degree of accuracy what the original writings said, there are still areas of uncertainty. Yet the Bible still functions as God's Word. Is it not possible that there were slight errors in the original writings that likewise do not prevent God's Word coming through? Perhaps it is better to think of the Bible as 'infallible', in the sense that it doesn't mislead us and will accomplish what God wants when we handle it properly.

Culture is important

Although the Bible speaks into every age and culture, it originated in specific seasons of history and from particular cultures. We must not gloss over the worldview and circumstances of the people who wrote it, but see things with their eyes first. That way we are better equipped to apply the message to our own time and place. This will be covered extensively in the next session. The fact that God engaged with and interacted with specific people in history, tailoring and adapting his word to them, even accommodating himself to their limitations at that time, gives us hope as we realise God will do the same in every era and culture. He is a God who engages with us in our day too!

The Bible speaks with many voices – hear them together



Some sceptics delight to point out apparent contradictions in the Bible. And in fact, some Bible writers appear to have different viewpoints to each other. If we could put Paul and James in a room together, they would probably disagree about some things (though not the essentials of who Jesus is and our need of him). But the genius and mystery of the God-breathed Scriptures is that God oversaw what they wrote such that their writings complement one another and don't go beyond certain limits. (If James was a legalist, maybe that's why he only got to write one book, whereas Paul wrote many!) Where there are apparent contradictions,

we can let the Bible interpret itself by looking at the whole balance of Scripture. We can allow some scriptures to be the lens through which we view others. Of course, not all Christians take the same scriptures as the primary ones – which is where we need to be gracious to one another!

The Bible is a progressive revelation

It is important to realise that the teaching of the Bible, and the understanding of its writers, develops and expands from the earlier writings to the later ones. For example, throughout most of the Old Testament, there is only a hazy understanding of what happens to people after death. Only gradually did an awareness of future resurrection grow. (The Sadducees, who only accepted the first five books as authentic, didn't believe in resurrection because it is not found there.)



The two stories of David numbering his troops¹ show a development of thought from God being the direct cause of everything, including evil, to there being an adversary (Satan) who, whilst limited by God's sovereignty, can act in some way independently. The earlier story is not 'wrong' (seen from a certain point of view) but is over-simplified by the limited viewpoint of the writer at that time.

Similarly, the 'wrath' of God begins like the vengeance of an angry deity, but increasingly starts to look like the consequences of human sin that God reluctantly allows to come upon people after much loving warning. The earlier scriptures need to be viewed in the light of later revelation, especially the nature of Jesus himself, who truly reveals God.

Final thoughts

The Bible is the book God wanted us to have. It is divine in origin, but also a fully human book. It has a power and authority about it that is different to any other human literature – even the writings of the early church in the second generation after Christ, do not carry the weight and majesty of the New Testament writings – but it is still rooted in real human culture, an authentic human story, with real human beings in all their variety as the sources God used to give us his message of love and relationship.

"It is not magical, nor is it faultless: human beings wrote it. But by something which I would not hesitate to describe as a miracle, there is a concentration upon that area of inner truth which is fundamental and ageless. That, I believe, is the reason why millions of people have heard the voice of God speaking to them through these seemingly artless pages." – J.B. Phillips, *New Testament translator*.

¹ See 2 Sam 24:1 and 1 Chr 21:1