

Getting it Straight from the Bible

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Foreword

The peace campaigner outside Purley post office assailed me with her rhetoric. When I told her I was a Christian she switched to a scriptural tack.

‘Jesus said, “I came to bring peace” ’, she informed me.

‘He said, “I did *not* come to bring peace, but a sword” ’, I replied.

‘Oh, you can prove anything from the Bible!’ was her retort.

Where does this idea come from, that you can ‘prove anything from the Bible’? It is sadly true that those who hold the Bible to be the word of God can nevertheless come to very different conclusions on a number of matters. You don’t have to remove ‘not’ from its words, as my peace campaigner did. The impression may be given that the scriptures are like modelling clay—you can mould them into whatever shape you want.

Does the Bible indicate that believers ought by right to receive great financial prosperity and material riches from God? Is it essential to give a tenth of your income to the local church if you are not to come under God’s curse? Is all the evidence discovered by scientists to be dismissed if it goes against the literal words of the Bible? Bible-believing Christians have widely-differing views on these and many other subjects.

Now, I am not writing here about those who dismiss the claims of the Bible. I am writing about those who consider it to be the inspired word of God. Such differences of interpretation are a problem to Christians, who sense that something is amiss, yet do not know who (if anyone) is right. Worse than that, these matters bring the Bible into disrepute. If it is indeed God’s message to man, then surely it should be clear and unambiguous.

The basic problem is how we should interpret the scriptures. Somehow, we have managed to get much of the message of the Bible into a tangle, and we need to get it straightened out. What is more, we have mixed the revelation from God with our traditions, accumulated over the years. We need to get the message straight from the Bible and not from other sources. This book is intended to suggest help in these areas.

First of all, after considering what it means to say that the Bible is inspired (Chapter 1), this book proposes a few principles for interpreting the Bible which seem to me to be right and sensible (Chapter 2). When these principles are applied, certain basic truths show forth with great clarity (Chapters 3 to 6). These concern Christ, the people of God, the promised land, and law and grace. These basic truths then act as further principles for interpretation. If any other suggested teaching contradicts the basic truths, then it must be going astray.

Armed with these principles and basic truths, various controversial areas are examined in successive chapters (Chapters 7 to 13). These areas have been chosen because in my experience they have caused distress and confusion to many believers, and also because they serve to illustrate the use of the principles laid out in earlier chapters. The aim of the book is to be of help to ordinary evangelical Christians like myself, though I hope it may be of interest and use to others also.

It is necessary to give some indication of my background to show where I am coming from in writing these pages. I have studied the Bible for many years, especially when combing through it in order to write *Collins Thesaurus of the Bible* (HarperCollins, 2002) and subsequently *Collins Thematic Thesaurus of the Bible* (HarperCollins 2005).. I have found great riches in its pages. I have worked out my own way of approaching the Bible so as not to downplay its message, but rather to find the main thrust of its passages. Being a member of a housegroup has also enabled me to see the problems which questionable ideas can cause for ordinary Christians.

Some have tried, when reading an earlier draft of this book, to analyse the denominations and groups among which I have spent my time. I tell you now, this is a pointless exercise. Some of the material presented here is the very opposite to what I have been taught at some periods in my life. I am not wanting to present the views of particular sections or groups: I am trying to be true to what the Bible says.

Other readers have criticised the book because it is not a scheme of theology. It is not intended to be. I am not a theologian, and I am not seeking to present a thorough-going analysis of all theological themes. That I leave to others.

A word of warning needs to be included here. ‘This book may damage your nervous health.’ If it is true that my conclusions run counter to much of what I have been taught, some of them will almost certainly lay siege to beliefs which you hold dear. That cannot be helped. I am not trying to please everyone: I am trying to make clear what the message of the Bible is.

When Paul made his defence before the Jews in Jerusalem, they gave him a fair hearing until he approached matters which they could not accept—that God was concerned for the Gentiles (Acts 22:21). At this point they shouted ‘Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!’ (v. 22). This may be your reaction when I come to certain matters. Watch out for the feeling. Then ask yourself whether it is because I am violating the Bible, or whether I am simply assailing your traditional ideas about the Bible.

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from the New International Version. However, just about any other translation of the Bible could have been used.

I do not wish to engage in battles using theological terms and concepts. For one thing I am not equipped to do so, and for another, I do not think it would be of benefit to you, the reader. I am an evangelical Christian who is convinced that the

Bible is God’s word to mankind, and I want to share the blessing that his word has been to me.

So in this book I want to do three things:

- to elucidate the main message which God makes clear in his word;
- to chop down some of the weeds which have obscured that main message;
- to demonstrate good methods for handling the scriptures which anyone may use to interpret them in a straightforward way.

In short, I want you to be able to get it straight from the Bible.