

TAKING GOD
SERIOUSLY

Vital Things We Need to Know



J. I. Packer

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Taking God Seriously: Vital Things We Need to Know

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P R E F A C E

We in the West are a very food-conscious lot, and no wonder. Commercials on TV, ads in the newspapers and magazines, roadside billboards, flyers flowing from food stores, sections of magazines, and indeed entire magazines wholly devoted to diet and cuisine keep the allure and joy of eating vividly before our minds. Restaurants parade their styles and specialties all around us, fast-food outlets and coffee shops abound, and supermarkets stocking abundance of shining edibles vie for our custom. No surprise, then, that we overstock and end up throwing away food that is uneaten or gone bad. No surprise, either, that we overeat and that obesity brought on by imprudent snacking has become a major present-day problem. Food supply is not among our difficulties.

But it is not like that everywhere.

Something approaching a third of the world's population, two billion plus, are undernourished and go chronically hungry since where they live food is regularly in short supply. So do these hungry people always feel hungry? Actually, no; not only does absorption in other things keep hunger at bay for hours, as we all know by experience, but it is unhappily possible to get used to never having enough so that the body settles for always being below par. Then energy evaporates, appetites wither, and lethargy sets in. Famine, which we have all seen on TV, if not in the flesh, produces dull eyes, set features, slow motion, and slow speech. Vitality is absent. People go on living, but their famine-fed apathy shows what they are losing for lack of food. They need adequate regular meals, and need them urgently, which is why the civilized world gives high priority to famine relief.

Nor is famine the only cause of dehumanizing undernourish-

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ment. Extended periods of unbalanced diet—lacking protein, for instance, and short in its calorie count—can yield the same effects. And anorexia becomes self-starvation. Thus, living in the midst of plenty, one still can waste away. Tragic? Yes, but true, as many among us know.

UNDERNOURISHED BELIEVERS

These thoughts illustrate the perspective from which I write this book. As the years go by, I am increasingly burdened by the sense that the more conservative church people in the West, Protestant and Roman Catholic alike, are, if not starving, at least grievously undernourished for lack of a particular pastoral ministry that was a staple item in the church life of the first Christian centuries and also of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation era in Western Europe, but has largely fallen out of use in recent days. That ministry is called *catechesis*. It consists of intentional, orderly instruction in the truths that Christians are called to live by, linked with equally intentional and orderly instruction on how they are to do this.

A VITAL DISCIPLINE FOR ALL CHURCH PEOPLE

There are different levels of catechizing, according to the age-groups involved: catechizing is, or should be, a vital ongoing discipline for church people from nine to ninety, so angles, styles, and emphases will naturally vary. There are different ways of catechizing—question and answer, one-on-one; set presentation, orally or on paper, leading to monitored group discussion; offering formulae for memorization and affirmations for amplification; or the time-honored school system of chalk, walk, and talk in didactic dialogue with a class of learners—but essentially the same thing is being done each time. The Bible calls it, quite simply, teaching; on that basis we may further label it, disciplining.

Though Bible-based, catechesis is not exactly Bible study, and though it spurs devotion to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it is

in itself a discipline of thought in God's presence rather than of direct address to the Holy Three, or to any one of them. Its intended end product is Christians who know their faith, can explain it to enquirers and sustain it against skeptics, and can put it to work in evangelism, church fellowship, and the many forms of service to God and man for which circumstances call. As a nurturing discipline, catechesis may be said to correspond to the innermost ring of the dartboard, or rifle or archery target. Bible study meetings and prayer gatherings will reach the outer rings, but it is catechesis—this ongoing procedure of teaching and discipling—that hits the bull's-eye. The fact that all-age catechesis has fallen out of the curriculum of most churches today is thus a major loss, which, as was indicated above, has left many Christians undernourished and hence spiritually sluggish.

CHRISTIAN TRUTH AND APPLICATION

The essence of catechetical material is that it links the formulation of Christian truth (i.e., orthodoxy) with its application in Christian living (i.e., obedience, or orthopraxy, as nowadays it is often called). Several of the New Testament pastoral letters are classic examples. Glance with me at two of them, Paul's epistle to Christians at Rome and the anonymous epistle to Hebrews, that is, to members of Jewish Christian congregations. Both these documents are (1) *kerygmatic*, that is, proclaiming salvation through Jesus Christ, and (2) *didactic*, logically arranged to offer a single flow of foundational thinking. Thus they are (3) *catechetical*, that is, showing how *right belief* requires *right living* through an active faith that responds to Christ crucified, risen, and enthroned, and that likewise responds to all that is and will be ours in and through him, and to the plans of God the Father that undergird this salvation and this hope. (Colossians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter have the same catechetical character, but we cannot look at them here.) The catechetical agenda of Romans and Hebrews becomes clear as soon as we note what doctrinal substance they contain and what impact on the readers addressed is intended.

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Though the *readerships* of Romans and Hebrews were different (Romans was written mainly to non-Jewish converts; Hebrews, mainly to Jewish believers), and though the *styles* of the two writers are different and the situations of the two reading audiences differed, still we find that the following essential, basic *teachings* are set forth in both Romans and Hebrews in complementary ways.

TWO POSITIVE POINTS

1. THE REVELATION OF GOD IN AND THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, THE BRINGER OF SALVATION, OF WHOM BOTH WRITERS ARE SPEAKING WITH AUTHORITY

Jesus Christ is the Son of God, a distinct divine person within the divine unity, to be worshipped as the Father is worshipped (Rom. 1:4; 9:5; Heb. 1:1–14).

Jesus Christ is the Son of God incarnate, a fully divine person in his humanity, whom the Father in love has sent into this world for sinners' salvation (Rom. 1:3–7; 16:25–27; Heb. 2:5–18).

Jesus Christ gave his life at the Father's will as an atoning sacrifice for sins. He was raised from the dead by the power of God and lives, rules, and will one day return for the final judgment and the completing of our salvation from all sin and evil. Through Jesus Christ as Mediator sinful humans are reconciled to God, justified and forgiven by him, and given permanent access to him. Through Christ's outreach to them they are adopted into God's family, made his heirs with Christ, and assured of his eternal love for them (Rom. 2:5–16; 3:21–5:21; 8:15–23, 31–39; Heb. 2:10–18; 8:1–10:23; 12:5–11, 22–24).

Jesus Christ is the enthroned Lord whom Christians are to worship, call on, trust for help, and serve throughout their lives (Rom. 10:8–13; 13:14; 14:17–18; Heb. 4:14–16; 12:1–3; 13:7–15).

Jesus Christ imparts his own resurrection life to believers through their faith-union with him. This ongoing transformation of them toward full Christlikeness of perception and practice is

effected by the Holy Spirit and is expressed in baptism (Rom. 6:1–7:6; Heb. 8:10–12; 10:16–17).

2. THE RESPONSE REQUIRED FROM SINNERS WHO BECOME RECIPIENTS OF SALVATION, TO WHOM BOTH WRITERS ARE ADDRESSING PASTORAL GUIDANCE

Faith is required. *Faith* is a New Testament technical term. It means wholehearted acceptance of, trust in, and obedience to God, branched out into a threefold object: the Word of God, that is, the teaching of the Old Testament and the apostolic writers as such; the promises of God categorically; and the Son of God personally. Faith is credence plus commitment, assurance plus allegiance, and devotion plus discipleship. Faith flows from *understanding* the gospel, which is the effect of *learning* it, which is the outcome of being *taught* it (Rom. 1:16–17; 4:1–5:11; 10:5–17; 14:1–4, 20–23; Heb. 2:1–4; 3:1–6; 4:14–16; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–12:2).

Repentance is required. Repentance, a function of faith, is a remorseful reversing of one's previous self-centered, sin-serving habits and actions and turning to Christ to become his faithful and obedient follower, practicing repentance and pursuing holiness as a lifelong project (Rom. 2:4; 6:12–23; 13:12–14; Heb. 6:1–6; 12:1–4, 14–17).

Hope, motivating *endurance*, is required. Both are functions of faith in action. Hope is the divinely guaranteed certainty of good things to come; endurance is holding fast to one's God-given hope in the face of temptations and urgings to abandon it (Rom. 5:1–5; 8:23–25; 15:4–13; Heb. 3:6; 6:11–20; 10:23; 11:13–16).

Love is required. God, fellow-believers, and one's neighbors generally, are love's objects. Love to God means gratitude for his grace and a devoted doing of his will so as to please him. Love to fellow-believers means welcoming them into, and maintaining their welcome within, the circle of Christian fellowship, there serving their needs, spiritual and physical, encouraging them in their disci-

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planship, and taking care not to thoughtlessly put roadblocks in their path. Love to neighbors as such, whoever they are, means kindness, helpfulness, doing good to them, sharing resources with them, and forgoing all forms of revenge and tit for tat all along the line (Rom. 8:28; 12:6–13; 13:8–10; 14:13–22; Heb. 10:24–25; 13:1–5, 15–16).

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF GOD’S CHURCH

These positive points are the catechetical basics that these two epistles yield for discipling individual believers, the human building blocks of God’s church. Catechetical instruction on the church and church life, Bible-based like the basics listed above, would be the next stage in the discipling process (for which, it may be suggested, Paul’s letters to the Ephesians, to Timothy, and to Titus would be the primary New Testament resources).

It should be noted that in Romans and Hebrews the positive points that I have highlighted as, so to speak, the marrow of the discipling message were mostly laid out in what were implicitly, if not explicitly, corrective contexts—where error, inadequacy, and misconception were being exposed in order to be excluded. Clearing the ground mentally, in terms of “not that but this,” is in fact part of the catechetical process itself. Educators know that as white looks whiter on a blackboard and black looks blacker on a whiteboard, so meaning is more clearly and sharply seen when contrasted with what is not meant. So, too, competent catechesis (teaching and discipling), like the teaching of the Bible itself, needs to specify negative as well as positive corollaries to achieve fullest clarity in both comprehension and application.

SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT FOR ALL CHRISTIAN BELIEVERS

The job of a preface, as I understand it, is to give readers a preliminary word about the book itself by indicating its aim and scope, and, if I may put it so, its wavelength. I hope the preceding pages

have done this for the present volume. The chapters included in the book are ventures in adult catechesis, furnishing the mind and forming the judgment regarding key truths that are often challenged today. Since they were first produced separately, and at four-month intervals, some repetition was unavoidable; I ask that it be forgiven, now that they are all together.

As an Anglican, I write with a sense of urgency in response to recent trends in my own church context. But readers who are not Anglicans will recognize many of the same trends in their own denominational circles, and may find that this book speaks pointedly to their situations, challenges, and concerns. So while I write in hope of helping fellow-Anglicans into a mature faith, there is nothing exclusive about this need or aim. I offer examples from my Anglican experience, but before I am an Anglican I am an evangelical, and I have tried to write in such a way that all evangelicals—and would-be and should-be evangelicals—will benefit. The questions after each chapter have an Anglican slant, but I do not think that Christians anywhere who take their Christian commitment seriously will find these questions unfruitful for meditation and discussion in their own neck of the denominational woods.

Thus my prayer is that God may use this material (1) to ground thoughtful Christians more firmly and clearheadedly in their faith, (2) to stir them out of the sluggishness into which theological and spiritual undernourishment has brought so many of us, and (3) to help us all take to heart the marching orders given us by our Lord and his apostles—who charge us first to be and then to make disciples everywhere, starting from where we are. This is the Christian's serious business; God make us serious in attending to it.

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When a person falls into convulsions, short-term remedies may for the moment calm him down, but the long-term need is to diagnose the root cause of his trouble and treat that. So it is today with churches round the world, including the worldwide Anglican Communion, a body that is over seventy million strong and growing by leaps and bounds in both Asia and Africa. A much-publicized Episcopal decision in Canada to bless same-sex unions as if they were marriages, as well as the consecrating in the United States of a diocesan bishop who unashamedly lives in such a union, has convulsed global Anglicanism in the way that pebbles thrown into a pond send ripples over the entire surface of the water. Pressure groups and leadership blocs have emerged in Anglicanism's "Old West" (Britain, North America, Australasia) resolved to fight this issue till approval of gay pairings is fully established. Tensions over the question between and within provinces, dioceses, and congregations have become acute, and there is no end in sight.

What, we ask, is the root cause of these convulsions? What would be needed to get us beyond them? The fact we must face is that the clash of views on how, pastorally, to view and help male and female homosexuals grows out of a more basic cleavage about faith. To map this and suggest what to do about it is our present task.

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WHAT IS FAITH? A WORD THAT SLIPS AND SLIDES

Getting the hang of current disagreements about faith is not easy, for the word *faith* itself is used elusively and does in fact mean different things to different people, though this fact often goes unrecognized. The way of the “Old West” churches, in prayers, sermons, books, and discussions that seek to be unitive, is constantly to refer to the faith as a common property held by all who worship, but without defining or analyzing its substance, so that worshippers can go for years without any clear notion of what their church stands for. Theologians rise up to affirm that, in idea at least, faith goes beyond mere orthodoxy (belief of truth) to orthopraxy (living out that truth in worship and service, love to God and man)—and in saying this they are right so far. But when some think orthodoxy sanctions behavior that others see orthodoxy as ruling out, it is clear that agreement about the truth we live by is lacking, and that is what we have to look at now.

Complicating our task is the fact that all varieties of the dimension of life we call religion (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Baha’i, Voodoo, Sikh, New Age, Scientology, and the rest) are regularly lumped together with all the versions of Christianity (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, conservative Protestant, liberal Protestant) as so many *faiths*. This usage makes it seem that all religions should be seen as essentially similar—which is probably how most post-Christian Westerners do in fact see them, though in the church this is very much a minority idea. Then, too, we use the word *faith* for whatever hopes about the future individuals cherish and live by (e.g., that science will save the planet from ruin; that there will not be another economic crash like 1929; that this or that missing person will be found alive; that this or that cancer can be beaten; that every cloud will have a silver lining; and so on). These broader uses of the word grew up as its former Christian precision dissolved away, so that in modern Western speech *faith* has become a vague term, a warm

fuzzy slipping and sliding from one area of meaning to another all the time. In the New Testament, however, *faith* is a Christian technical term, specific in meaning as our secular technical terms (*computer, dividend, airplane, spanner, appendectomy, syllabus*, for example) are specific in meaning, and its New Testament meaning remained specific for Christians till about a century ago. It is something we need to get back to.

What did the apostolic writers have in mind when they spoke of faith? Nothing less than what they took to be the distinctive essence of Christianity: namely, a belief-and-behavior commitment to Jesus Christ, the divine-human Lord, who came to earth, died for sins, rose from death, returned to heaven, reigns now over the cosmos as his Father's nominated vice-regent, and will reappear to judge everyone and to take his own people into glory, where they will be with him in unimaginable joy forever. This was "the faith" that was taught and defended against Gnostic syncretists from the start (we see Paul in Colossians and John in his letters actually doing that); soon it was enshrined in creeds, which began as syllabi for catechetical instruction of enquirers; and, with its Trinitarian implications made explicit, it has since then been at the heart of mainstream Christianity everywhere. (The Reformers debated with Roman Catholics as to whether faith brings present justification directly, but no one in the debate doubted that real faith includes all that we have described.)

So faith, that is, believing, is in the New Testament a "two-tone" reality, a response to God's self-revelation in Christ that is both intellectual and relational. Mere credence—assent, that is, to "the faith"—is not faith, nor is commitment to a God or a Christ who is merely a product of human imagination. Christian faith is shaped, and its nature is determined, entirely by its object, just as the impression on a seal is shaped entirely by a die-stamp that is pressed down on the hot wax. The object of Christian faith, as the apostolic writers, the creeds, and the basic Anglican formularies (Articles, Prayer

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Book, and Homilies) present it, is threefold: first, God the Three-in-One, the Creator-become-Redeemer, who throughout history has been, and still is, transforming sinners into a new humanity in Christ; second, Jesus Christ himself, God incarnate and Savior, now absent from us in the flesh but personally and powerfully present with us through the Holy Spirit; and third, the many invitations, promises, commands, and assurances that the Father and the Son extend to all who will receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord and become his disciples, living henceforth by his teaching in his fellowship under his authority.

All of this is laid before us in the Bible, the revelatory book that God has given us for the forming of our faith. In the Bible, faith is a matter of knowing the facts of the gospel (the person, place, and work of Jesus Christ), welcoming the terms of the gospel (salvation from sin and a new life with God), and receiving the Christ of the gospel (setting oneself to live as his follower by self-denial, cross-bearing, and sacrificial service). Believing the biblically revealed facts and truths about God and trusting the living Lord to whom these facts and truths lead us are the two “tones,” the intellectual and relational aspects of real faith, blending like two-part harmony in music. This is the understanding of faith that needs to be reestablished.

We noted above that in our time the word *faith* has become a warm fuzzy, slipping and sliding in use in and out of its Christian meaning to refer to other believing and behaving that, whatever else they are, differ in significant ways from what we have described. This fuzzification of faith has developed in parallel to increasing ignorance of biblical teaching and growing skepticism as to whether that teaching as it stands may properly be called the Word of God. Is there a connection? Yes. When the church ceases to treat the Bible as a final standard of spiritual truth and wisdom, it is going to wobble between maintaining its tradition in a changing world and adapting to that world, and as the wobbles go on, uncertainty as to what is

the real substance of faith and the proper way of embracing it and living it out will inevitably increase.

But the Bible is currently interpreted in many different ways, and scholars' arguments about its meaning are regularly over ordinary people's heads. So even when Scripture is acknowledged as the standard, are confusion and uncertainty likely to be any less? This is a fair question, and to answer it we need to take a longer, harder look at the Bible than perhaps we have ever done before.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE? FAITH AND THE TALKING BOOK

Most people in churches nowadays have never read through the Bible even once; the older Christian habit of reading it from start to finish as a devotional discipline has virtually vanished. So in describing the Bible we start from scratch, assuming no prior knowledge.

The Bible consists of sixty-six separate pieces of writing, composed over something like a millennium and a half. The last twenty-seven of them were written in a single generation: they comprise four narratives about Jesus called Gospels, an account of Christianity's earliest days called the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one pastoral letters from teachers with authority, and a final admonition to churches from the Lord Jesus himself, given partly by dictation and partly by vision. All these books speak of human life being supernaturally renovated through, in, with, under, from, and for the once crucified, now glorified Son of God, who fills each writer's horizon, receives his worship, and determines his mind-set at every point.

Through the books of the Bible runs the claim that this Jesus fulfills promises, patterns, and premonitions of blessings to come that are embodied in the thirty-nine pre-Christian books. These are of four main types: *history* books, telling how God called and sought to educate the Jewish people—Abraham's family—to worship, serve, and enjoy him, and to be ready to welcome Jesus Christ when he appeared; *prophetic* books, recording oracular sermons from God conveyed by human messengers expressing threats,

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hopes, and calls to faithfulness; *poetry* books, containing songs to and about God (Psalms) and celebrating love between a man and a woman (Song of Solomon); and *wisdom* books, which in response to God's revelation show how to praise, pray, live, love, and cope with whatever may happen.

Christians name these two collections the Old and New Testaments respectively. *Testament* means covenant commitment, and the Christian idea, learned from Paul, from the writer to the Hebrews, and from Jesus himself, is that God's covenant commitment to his own people has had two editions. The first edition extended from Abraham to Christ; it was marked throughout by temporary features and many limitations, not unlike a nonpermanent shanty built of wood on massive concrete foundations. The second edition extends from Christ's first coming to his return and is the grand full-scale edifice for which the foundations were originally laid. The writer to the Hebrews, following Jeremiah's prophecy, calls this second superstructure the new covenant and explains that through Christ, who is truly its heart, it provides a better priesthood, sacrifice, place of worship, range of promises, and hope for the future than were known under its predecessor. Christians see Christ as the true center of reference in both Testaments, the Old always looking and pointing forward to him and the New proclaiming his past coming, his present life and ministry in and from heaven, and his future destiny at his return; and they hold that this is the key to true biblical interpretation. Christians have maintained this since Christianity began.

Christians call the Bible the Word of God—"God's Word written," as Anglican Article 20 puts it—for two reasons. The first is its divine origin. Jesus and his apostles always treat Scripture as the utterance of God through the Holy Spirit, transmitted by the agency of men whose minds God moved in such a way that in all their composing they wrote just what he wanted as their contribution to the text and texture of the full Bible that he planned. The Bible's quality

of being thus completely shaped by God, so that it may and must always be read as God testifying to himself through the testimony to him of the human writers, is its *inspiration*. The second reason for calling the Bible God's Word is its divine ministry of revealing God's mind to us as the Holy Spirit gives understanding of what its text says, and thus makes us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (see 2 Tim. 3:14–17). This quality of thus communicating knowledge of God, of his grace, and of his Son, is the Bible's *instrumentality*. Your word is formally the utterance that proceeds from your mouth and substantially the expression and communication of your mind, and so it is with Scripture as the Word of God: formally, more than a million words strung together; substantially, God's inexhaustible, Christ-centered, salvation-oriented, self-revelation to us. The Bible is both God-given and God-giving, and as such it stands as the standard of Christian faith.

Christianity expresses the thought of Scripture as the standard by calling it the *canon*. This is a Greek word, meaning a measuring rod, and thus a rule. Some have wondered whether the sixty-six-book Protestant canon includes all it should, or contains items that should not be there, but uncertainty about this is unwarranted. There is no good reason for doubting (1) that our Old Testament canon was established in Palestine before Jesus was born, and (2) that the first churches were right to see documents authored and/or approved by apostles as carrying God's authority and complementing the Old Testament, and (3) that they were also right to claim the Old Testament as Christian Scripture and to interpret it as foreshadowing Jesus Christ the Messiah, and the kingdom of God and the new life that came with him.

Nor is there any good reason to fear that the church made mistakes when in the second and third centuries, confronted with spurious gospels, epistles, and acts bearing apostolic names, it identified the genuine apostolic writings and dismissed the rest. Nor do there exist outside the canon any documents that for any reason

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seem to merit inclusion. At the Counter-Reformational Council of Trent the Roman Catholic Church defined into the canon the twelve-book pre-Christian Apocrypha that Jerome had found in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) and included in his Latin rendering (the Vulgate) in the fifth century; but since these books never belonged to the Hebrew Palestinian canon that Jesus knew, the council's decision must be judged a mistake. It is precisely the books listed in Anglican Article 6 and found in every printed Bible, neither more nor less, that together form the canonical Word of God.

All God's people agree that as God's Word, the Bible has authority—God's authority! What this means is not always clearly seen, but the mainstream understanding is as follows: Authority means the right, and so the claim, to control. Sometimes it operates by agreement, as when authority is given to political leaders, army officers, team captains, and policemen, but in this case it is intrinsic. God has authority because he is God, and we should bow to his authority because we are his creatures. What comes through to humble and open-hearted people as they read and study the Bible, or hear it read and taught, is awareness of God's reality as our almighty, morally perfect, and totally awesome Maker, plus the sense that he is telling us truth about relations between him and us, plus a realization that he is calling for, indeed commanding, faith in him and faithfulness to him, repentance and redirection, self-denial and obedience as the path to the life he wants us to taste here and enjoy hereafter. All of this centers constantly on words and deeds of Jesus, the church's living Lord and, as we have said, Scripture's point of reference, who is felt again and again to be stepping out of the book into our lives in order to take them over and change them. The Bible is thus experienced as a book that talks, speaking for itself by pointing us to the Father and the Son, who speak for themselves as they offer us forgiveness and acceptance and new life. The authority of Scripture is not just a matter of God putting our minds straight, but of God

capturing our hearts for fully committed discipleship to the Lord Jesus. So the Bible is to be approached with reverence, handled with care and prayer, and studied, not to satisfy curiosity in any of its forms, but to deepen responsive fellowship with God who made us, loves us, seeks us out, and offers us pardon, peace, and power for righteousness through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The modern world knows virtually nothing of this approach to Scripture. It is vital that the church recover it, follow it, and proclaim the need for it everywhere.

For two centuries now in Protestant communities the Bible, like so many more premodern things, has been under suspicion—in this case, of being factually false, spiritually wrong-headed, ethically irrelevant, and antihuman in its overall influence. Once, most Westerners knew something of what was in the “Good Book” to guide us in our lives; nowadays, however, very few know or care what the Bible teaches. Neither at home nor at school is the Bible taught, and it has to be said that church Sunday schools, though strong on favorite Bible stories, often fail to acquaint children with the Bible as a whole. Though the criticisms and doubts about Scripture have been compellingly countered over and over again, that does not change the secular mind-set of our culture or banish biblical illiteracy from our midst. Yet ignorance of the Bible remains tragic, for it virtually guarantees ignorance of God. To reestablish in people’s minds the truth and wisdom of the biblical message, so that they see they need to know what is in the Bible in order to enjoy a positive relationship with God, is perhaps the church’s most urgent task today.

WHO’S THERE? FAITH AND THE TRIUNE GOD

We saw that taking faith seriously means taking seriously the fact that Christianity has a given and abiding truth-content, and that therefore we must take the Bible seriously as the authoritative, self-revealing Word of our authoritative God. From this it follows that

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we must take God seriously in the terms in which the Bible displays him. Now we must see what this involves.

A latter-day theological student, we are told, secured an A for answering the rather pompous exam question “What is the significance of Jesus Christ for our postmodern era?” in three words—“Whatever you wish.” That catches exactly the way people today think and speak of God: the word *God* becomes a wax nose that can be shaped or, rather, twisted out of shape any way one fancies. But fancy is fantasy, and what we need to know is the truth about the God who is there, whom we must all meet on judgment day, and who meets us here and now when we allow the Bible to speak to us. Here is a thumbnail sketch of what the Bible tells us about him.

First, God is *holy*, different and standing apart from us, awesome and sometimes becoming fearsome to us. Holiness is a biblical technical term signifying the God-ness of God, the combined quality of being infinite and eternal; omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient; utterly pure and just; utterly faithful to his own purposes and promises; morally perfect in all his relationships; and marvelously merciful to persons meriting the opposite of mercy. God in his holiness is greatly to be praised and worshipped for both his greatness and his goodness at all times. Many of the psalms express this.

Second, God is *gracious*. *Grace* is a New Testament technical term meaning love to the unlovely and seemingly unlovable, love that is primarily not a passion evoked by something in the loved one, but a purpose of making the loved one great and glad: love that to this end gives, never mind the cost, and rescues those in need, never mind their unworthiness. The New Testament focuses throughout on a plan of grace whereby God has redeemed and is now fashioning for endless joy with himself a new humanity, whose members are drawn from a human race—our human race—that is at present ruined and lost.

Third, God is *triune*. *Trinity*, the church's word for expressing this internal three-in-oneness, or triunity, is a technical term coined to crystallize something that the Bible demonstrates. Both Testaments affirm that there is only one God, but the New Testament clearly shows us three divine persons acting as a team to carry through the work of grace that saves sinners and creates the church. The first is the Father, who planned everything, who sent his Son to take human nature and die on the cross in his people's place, thus releasing them from the judgment that faced them, and who now justifies (that is, pardons and accepts) them, adopting them as his family and heirs when they put faith in Jesus. The second is Jesus the Son, God incarnate, his Father's servant, our Mediator, who died for us, rose for us, reigns for us, and will return for us—the Savior and Lord whose devoted disciples we are called to be, and whom we shall be adoring forever. The third is the Holy Spirit, the executive, hands-on agent of the Father and the Son in creation, providence, and grace, who draws us to faith in Christ by making us see that we need him and calls us to come to him, who unites us to him as we receive him, who renews us constantly through Word and sacrament, prayer and fellowship, in our new life of discipleship to him, and who from within that life gives us glorious foretastes of heaven's happiness and joy. As the three persons are linked together as sources of blessing, so they are linked as the focus of praise, prayer, and benediction. The New Testament writers speak consistently on all of this.

What are we looking at? Not tritheism, a doctrine of three separate gods cooperating; that would in fact be a form of polytheism. Nor is it what has been called modalism, a doctrine of one person playing three separate roles, like the late Peter Sellers in *Dr. Strangelove*; that would in fact be a form of unitarianism. No; by inescapable implication it is a doctrine of the only God as a tri-personal Three-in-One—Trinitarianism in solution, you might say, throughout the New Testament, as sugar is in solution when you

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have stirred it into your coffee. A reality beyond what our minds can grasp? Yes. (We are only creatures, after all; we should not be surprised to find there is more to our Maker than we can comprehend.) A certainty, evident from the mutual relations that the New Testament reveals between the persons in the divine team? Yes, again. A truth to be affirmed as something that is, even though we do not know how it can be? Exactly. So we settle for it as an authentic apostolic conception, enshrined in and safeguarded by the church's technical Trinitarian vocabulary, and we take care not to lose sight of this truth as we move ahead.

Fourth, God *states ideals for, and sets limits to, human behavior*. His moral law is found in the Ten Commandments and backup Mosaic material, in the Prophets, in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and other teachings, and in the ethical sections of the New Testament letters. Law in Hebrew is *torah*, a word primarily implying not public legislation but family instruction, given with parental authority, goodwill, and concern for the family's well-being. It is vital to realize that God's law, expressing as it does his holy will and reflecting his holy nature, fits and fulfills humanity as created; it is the Maker's handbook, we might say, for human happiness, and disregard of it not only displeases God but also damages ourselves. God has made us and redeemed us so that we might bear his image, which includes, along with rational and responsible wisdom, moral perfection that matches his own. "You shall be holy," he says, "for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:15–16, citing Lev. 11:44). This means love and worship with obedience Godward, and love and service with wisdom manward. Pleasing God must always be our goal, and lawless disregard of him, of our fellow-humans, and of the behavioral standards that have been set is always sin, needing repentance if it is to be forgiven. All sin is categorically off limits; doing evil even in a good cause cannot please God. The Bible delineates many behavior patterns that God sees as bad and explicitly forbids.

One restrictive maxim spelled out in both Testaments is that

the only right place for gratifying our sexual drive, huge and hungry as it may be, is within monogamous marriage, where mutual sexual pleasure is designed to further both pair bonding and procreation. Homosexual acts are explicitly ruled out. Desires for such acts, like other desires to commit sin, must therefore be resisted in God's strength as strongly as possible. Let it be said that all Christians have lifelong battles with similarly unruly desires in some form, although few such desires are hailed as good and glamorized in the way that homosexual urgings are in today's Western societies, and even in some pockets of today's Anglican and other churches. Certainly, saying no to any mode of inappropriate sexual activity may feel for the moment, to use Jesus's image, like cutting off a hand or a foot, or gouging out an eye—negating, that is, some part of yourself that you feel you cannot live well without. But the way of holiness requires of all of us resolute resistance to a wide range of temptations at point after point in our pilgrimage, and such resistance gives us in the short term something of this same feeling. C. S. Lewis pictures this by his image, in *The Great Divorce*, of the man with the lizard of lust on his shoulder, endlessly whispering to him that without the lust his life will not be worth living. But letting God have his way with the lizard sets the man unimaginably free. The spiritual battles that homosexuals face are thus not unique to them. We all know how sinful desire will masquerade as a special case for which an exception to a general rule may warrantably be made, just as we know all too well the sense of guilt that weighs us down after we have indulged some craving in a way that in our heart we know was wrong. Pastoral care of homosexuals, as of the rest of us, involves strengthening everyone's power to recognize and resist whatever besetting sins they have.

Such, then, is the God of the Bible, the unchanging God who is always there whatever styles or shifts may mark the culture that surrounds the church. This is the God with whom we all have to deal. In an era like ours, in which Western culture is being constantly

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reshaped by the rapid mutations of post-Christianity, that must be highlighted and insisted on in our faith and witness. God is the same, Jesus Christ is the same, and essential Christianity is the same as they were in the first century, when the pagan world was turned upside down by the witness of the apostles.

WHAT WENT WRONG? FAITH AND THE MELTDOWN OF BIBLICAL TRUTH

When reason insists on ruling—that is, making original decisions of its own—in the realm of faith, where, as we have seen, God’s truth should be received on God’s authority via God’s authoritative written Word, the results are bleak indeed. In comes relativism, the abolishing of all absolute standards for belief and behavior; in comes skepticism about all long-standing beliefs, as if their age automatically destroys their credibility; in comes pluralism, the confused condition in which we accept incompatibles side by side without full commitment to any of them; in comes agnosticism, the don’t-know, can’t-be-sure, who-am-I-to-say?, I-give-up, don’t-bug-me state of mind. Each of these *isms* is familiar among us today, they creep into churches as well as going on parade outside them, and the church of Christ is sadly enfeebled in consequence.

The process of decline that produced this state of affairs, in which most of Western Protestantism has in fact shared, had two stages. First, from the mid-nineteenth century on, biblical criticism, evolutionary dogma, socialist utopianism, and scientific pragmatism have called into question many aspects of biblical teaching and Christian supernaturalism, so that the whole message about Christ, salvation, and the church has become blurred, and the doctrinal definiteness that has marked the Christian tradition is felt increasingly to be unwarranted and unconvincing. Then, second, since the middle of the twentieth century some teachers have recast biblical narratives to which they denied factual status (miracle stories, including Jesus’s virgin birth, bodily resurrection, and ascension to heaven, in

the first instance) as symbolizing aspects of the inner experience of the church and the Christian; they have read biblical law codes as directing us to follow the best existing notions of secular justice; and they have spread the idea that loose spiritualizing in this way is the only proper method of biblical interpretation. The effect, as anyone can see, is to turn Christianity into a historically continuous church-based mysticism of transcendental God-feelings and attitudes of benevolence, none of which depends on any space-time events, and all of which, it seems, might cheerfully continue into the future even if it could be shown that Jesus Christ had never lived and that the gospel of salvation from sin is a mere mirage.

Much of the church today, including the Anglican Church of Canada and the Episcopal Church in the United States, has two religions in its womb—or shall we say in its theological colleges, in the minds and hearts of its clergy, in its publications, and in the mentality of its members. There is the historic faith, which this little book tries to identify, and there is the alternative Christianity that we have just described. The former is spelled out, for example, in the historic Book of Common Prayer and was given constitutional status in Canada by the Solemn Declaration of 1893; the fingerprints of the latter, sanitized somewhat, can be found in the Canadian Book of Alternative Services and the American prayer book of 1979. One recalls Elijah's call for clearheaded choice at Mount Carmel: "How long will you go limping [some translations, "hobbling"] between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

A robust return to the older wisdom about faith's true object is urgently needed if the Anglican Church in particular is ever to impact the surrounding culture again. The same must be said of other churches with Reformation roots, both sides of the border, and elsewhere. All in these communities who take faith seriously should unite to work for this return.

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QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Can there be orthopraxy without orthodoxy? If not, why not?
2. How should orthodoxy lead to orthopraxy? Think of examples of how this might or might not happen.
3. How would you explain the nature of faith to a nonchurchgoer?
4. How would you explain the importance of the truth of the Trinity to a nonchurchgoer?
5. What forms of pastoral care and fellowship can help a person to resist besetting temptations?
6. What is required to achieve and maintain Christian faithfulness in matters of morality?
7. Is it ever true that the world has the wisdom and the church must play catch-up? In what respects, if any, is this claim not true?