

# Class 1: The Big Picture

*No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says: He is always convinced that it says what he means.*

*-George Bernard Shaw*

*Another century and there will not be a Bible on earth.*

*-Voltaire (mid 1700's)*

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,*

*-2 Timothy 3:16*

## **BIBLICAL STORY LINE: CREATION → FALL → REDEMPTION → CONSUMATION**

The Bible is not just a book full of weakly connected moralisms and stories. It is one, coherent, beautiful **Story** of what God the great King has done and will do to rescue his creation and creatures from peril. Christianity is a story. It is the fairy tale that is actually true. It is the story of history, not only of humanity but of the universe itself—a drama with a beginning (creation), a crisis (the fall of humanity into sin, and the subsequent effects of death and brokenness), a present solution (grace and redemption), and an ultimate healing (the renewal of all things). The author and perfecter of this Story is Jesus (Hebrews 12:2).

**O. Palmer Robertson:** “I will be your God and you will be my people” is the heartbeat of every divine covenant in the Bible. This formula of hope appears in the first book of the Bible to reassure a man frustrated with waiting (Gen. 17:7-8). In the last book of the Bible it bursts with brilliance to illuminate the believer’s final glory (Rev. 21:3). Between the beginning and the end, the constant encouragement of the man or woman needing God is that same covenantal center: God has committed Himself so that He can be forever your God and you can be His people.”

We want to gain a basic overview of history in terms of creation, fall, and redemption. What we must keep in mind here as we begin is that we are prone to remake God and His Word in terms of our experience and reason (in our own image). This is a current trend in world religions and in our own culture. However, in Christianity, we see that God has written the grand drama and that as we are caught up in His Story, we are remade in His image.

**Michael Horton:** “Do not underestimate the power of narratives. A narrative of conquest creates one sort of identity and consequent actions, while a narrative of oppression forms another. We are ‘storied’ people and cannot help but think of ourselves as somehow characters in a plot. Worldviews are, in fact, storied plots: the story of America, the story of political liberation, the story of global capitalism, the story of alienation (existentialism), the story of progress (modernism), the story of no-Story, only stories (postmodernism).”

### **Creation**

When the Bible talks about creation, it talks about the way things were originally designed by God—that is, the way things are *supposed* to be. When God created the universe, the world, the plants and animals, and the human race, it was all “good” (see Genesis 1-2). To be “good” in the biblical sense is to be flawless, impeccable, radiant, glorious, beautiful, PERFECT. This is the way God made things to be.

It is precisely because of this creation theme that we hate suffering—God did not design the world for suffering.

It is because of creation that we are broken-hearted when relationships fail—God did not design relationships to fail but to thrive.

It is because of creation that we get frustrated at weeds in the yard, cars that break down, finances that go into the toilet, etc.—God did not design the world for frustration.

In his original design, things were *supposed* to work, and never fall apart. It is because of creation that we hate injustice, divisions, racism, and so on. It is because of creation that we hate death—because we were designed by the one who made us to *live*.

Basically, everything we see that is wrong in the world, and become frustrated, saddened, and/or torn apart over it—these reactions flow from the inherent sense of the original and “good” design of the Creator in whose image we have been made. In the words of Cornelius Plantinga, God’s peace, his “shalom,” is violated whenever anything goes wrong. It’s not the way things are supposed to be. It’s like a Mercedes with a flat tire, or a once-beautiful yard filled with weeds, or a husband and wife who just can’t seem to connect. It’s not the way it’s supposed to be.

## **Fall**

The cold, hard fact is that things indeed *have* gone wrong with God’s creation. Ever since Adam and Eve attempted to become like God, choosing to listen to the life-sucking words of the cunning serpent instead of the life-giving words of God the creator (Genesis 3:1-7), the world, and those who live in it, have been cursed (Genesis 3:14-19). Not only we as human beings, but the entire creation, has been “groaning” for release from its captivity to sin, suffering, and things always falling apart—no longer existing in the beautiful, radiant, and “good” fashion in which they were designed to exist (Romans 8:22). In the present state of things, *everything* on earth and in the universe is fallen and affected by sin—distorted, broken, falling short of its original, God-given purpose. This is what it is to be “in Adam,” a narrative of pointless rebellion against a good God and His creation, leading only to frustration and death.

**George Herbert:** I cried when I was born and every day shows why.

**Simone Weil:** There are only two things which pierce the human heart. One is beauty. The other is affliction.

**Think about it for a minute:** To get a clear picture of the realities of fallen existence, just take two minutes and make a list of everything in your life, and in the world at large, *that you wish were different or that you wish you could fix*. Chances are you will come up with a long, depressing list! If not, it is guaranteed that eventually

your list will grow—because even *you* are subject to decay and death.

## **Present Redemption**

The good news of the Gospel is that all things in the universe are being, and can be, redeemed. The ultimate purpose of God is to wipe *all* of creation clean of *all* the effects of sin until it is all restored to wholeness, beauty, and glory. The first promise of such redemption shows up in Genesis 3:15, which is the first promise of the coming of Jesus, who would ultimately deal a deadly blow to the head of the serpent.

The rest of Scripture gives us the unfolding story of God's intention to redeem, or to "buy back" for himself the world and his people, until we all reach the place where we are living out "the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:21)."

**Already and not yet.** Christian theologians rightly speak of the "already" and the "not yet" in terms of God's present activity of redeeming the world and people to himself. In terms of the "already," God has *already begun* an invasion of this fallen, broken world in the loving act of sending his Son Jesus for our rescue. In knowing Jesus we begin to experience eternal life *now* (John 10:10), meaning that we who are filled with God's Spirit are *already* (albeit very gradually) on the way toward character change, toward becoming beautiful as Jesus is—in a renewed and growing love for God and love for people, in manifestations of the fruit of God's Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26). The "not yet" speaks to the anticipatory waiting for the ultimate renewal of all things.

### **Consummation**

The ultimate renewal of all things is where all of history is headed. There is nothing we can do to stop it. God will restore everything to its original design—to make all things, and all people, *GOOD* again, in the fullest and truest sense. This is what heaven is in the Biblical sense. Scripture woos us with a glimpse of this ultimate reality when it speaks of true peace on earth (see Isaiah 11:6-9 for a beautiful, poetic picture of this promise), the absence of all turmoil and suffering (Revelation 21:1-5). Ultimate renewal means the end of war, the end of sickness, the end of suffering, the end of relational tension, the end of the apparent absence of love and mercy in the world, the end of injustice, the end of sin and death.

**A fairy tale ending that's true.** All who trust in Jesus, who have him as their ultimate hope in life and in death, have this glorious future to look forward to. Imagine a world in which everything is beautiful, nothing breaks, and everyone loves each other with a perfect love, and where the beauty of God can be seen in all its splendor. It's yours for the taking—through the Gospel.

### **Competing Stories:**

- A. The American Dream—Story of hard work, self-reliance, and perseverance
- B. Existentialism—Story of ever-increasing hopelessness
- C. Modernism—Story is inside you
- D. Progress—Science and Technology will discover all the mysteries of life
- E. Postmodernism—You must write your own story, define your own meaning

Movies that tell a competing story:

- 1) The American Dream - Rocky
- 2) Existentialism – Fight Club

- 3) Modernism – The Wizard of Oz
- 4) Progress – Star Trek
- 5) Postmodernism – The Matrix

It is in worship, community, and the study of God's word that we are incorporated into God's Story, not He into ours. Think of it in terms of concentric circles. The outer ring is the narrative of redemptive history as a whole; the next ring is the narrative of the people of God within that historical drama; while the inside ring is our own individual life's emplotment in the context of those two outer rings.

### THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE



Jesus said that man would not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). Historically, the church has echoed the teaching of Jesus and the Bible itself that the Bible is the voice of God, the “Word of God.”

The Westminster Confession says the Bible is “the rule of faith and life...the Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any man or church but completely on God, its author, Who is Himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the “Word of God.” (WCF, Ch. 1, p.2 and 4)

The university experience of one church officer may be illustrative. During college years, belief in the Bible's authority and reliability were quickly challenged in academic studies, including religious course studies. In a New Testament course, one evangelical sought to defend the trustworthiness of Scripture to the liberal professor (who was also a clergyman). The professor dismissed the idea of God's inspiration of the Bible, saying, “And I suppose that your Bible came straight from heaven to the University bookstore with a price tag on it!”

What does it mean that God inspired the Scriptures? Did He dictate them? Translate them into English? Oversee the choice of books?

Paul says, “All Scripture is given by the inspiration of God.” (2 Timothy 3:16). The word “inspiration” is a translation of a Greek word meaning “God-breathed.” We believe that the Holy Spirit used human authors, their individual backgrounds, vocations, languages and experiences to write, not just their own opinions, but also His words. That is why the prophets could say, “Thus saith the Lord.” The Holy Spirit superintended this process. He did not dictate the words. Rather He communicated through human writers the very Word of God.

The Christian church has historically affirmed the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. “Inerrancy” means that the Bible is without error. If the Bible is superintended and inspired by God, it cannot err. “Authority” means that the Bible is our rule for faith and practice in every area as to which it speaks.

That the Bible is inerrant and authoritative does not necessarily mean that every part of the Bible is to be taken “literally.” The Bible uses poetic language, such as describing Christians as “the salt of the earth.” That does not mean we are thrown out on the sidewalk to melt ice. Christians should use rules of interpretation to understand the Bible, so it is not necessary or always helpful to read the Bible literally.

Inspiration does not mean that the Bible translations we have today are without error, but that the original manuscripts were without error. Nor does inspiration mean that every statement made in the Bible is true. Job, for instance, receives some bad advice from his well-meaning friends. Solomon says in Ecclesiastes that all is vanity; there is no purpose in life. However, we know from the context and other parts of the Bible that he was speaking from the perspective of human despair.

### **Can I Trust the Bible?**

(The majority of the material from this section comes directly from Mark Driscoll and Tim Keller.)

One major stumbling block among skeptics is the commonly-held assumption that the Bible can no longer be accepted as reliable and authoritative, particularly in light of progress in science, history, and culture. In addition, many believe it is hard to be sure one way or another whether the accounts in the Bible are actually historical. Lastly, so much of the Bible’s teaching seems to be socially regressive (women, slavery, polygamy, etc.). So, how can the Bible be trusted?

**Christianity’s answer:** Once the Bible is held under strict, honest, open-minded scrutiny, it actually takes much more faith *not* to believe in its reliability, than it does to believe the Bible is a thoroughly reliable document. (*NOTE:* Most of the following insights are borrowed from Tim Keller and Mark Driscoll, and then expanded upon):

- **The timing of the biblical Gospels is far too early to be legends.** The Gospels were written a mere 30 to 60 years following Jesus’ death. Paul’s letters, which support all of the Gospel accounts, were written *a mere 20 years* after the events. This being the case, it is difficult to imagine that Christianity could gain so many followers early on, were it not clearly established among those who lived in the first century that the record of Jesus’ life and death was not congruent with how it had been recorded in the Gospels and Paul’s

letters.

- **Their content is far too counter-productive to be legendary.** Many of the accounts recorded in the Gospels would not have shed Christianity in a very positive light to first century contemporaries. Were the Gospels legends, it would seem more than odd that their writers would include details and stories about Jesus and his followers that, to the average person at that time, would have made Christianity look something less than appealing.

**Some examples.** Jesus crying out because God had abandoned him. The fact that Jesus lived most of his ministry years as a homeless person, and ended up dying the death of a shameful criminal. The first witnesses of the resurrection being women (women were regarded as second class in the first century, on par with a slave). The fact that Jesus was firmly opposed to the well-established religious norms of his day. The fact that Jesus chose common men and women (many of whom were significant failures...tax collectors, prideful fishermen, prostitutes, people who were commonly regarded as “sinners” and outcasts, etc.) to be his primary friends and followers. None of these things helped Christianity in the eyes of first century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents are recorded is that they really happened.

**The offensiveness of the Bible is culturally relative.** Many of the things in the Bible that offend, say, the average American (slavery and polygamy notwithstanding), are actually very normal and accepted things in other cultures.

**Cultural conditioning.** Texts you find difficult and offensive are ‘common sense’ to people in other cultures. And many of the things you find offensive because of your beliefs and convictions, many will seem silly to your grandchildren just as many of your grandparents’ beliefs offend you. Therefore, to simply reject any Scripture (on the basis of something that to you does not seem to be “in tune with the times”) is to assume your culture (and worse yet, your time in history) is superior to all others. It is narrow-minded in the extreme. (Tim Keller, *Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs*)

### **Why Should I Trust that the Bible is Accurate?**

Some people struggle in trusting that the early copies of the original book of the Bible are trustworthy. Three general tests exist for determining the historicity and accuracy of any ancient text: the bibliographical test (number and quality of manuscripts), the internal test (the consistency of the text to not contradict itself), and the external test (the accuracy of the text in relation to other works of history from that period).

**Test #1 – The Bibliographical Test:** The bibliographical test seeks to determine the quantity and quality of documents, as well as how far removed they are from the time of the originals. The quantity of NT manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature. There are over 5,300 Greek manuscripts, about 10,000 Latin manuscripts, and another 9,300 manuscripts in other languages (Syriac, Coptic, etc.). No other document of antiquity even begins to approach these #s.

Author	Date	Earliest	Time Span	# of	Accuracy
--------	------	----------	-----------	------	----------

	<b>Written</b>	<b>Copy</b>		<b>Copies</b>	
Homer	c. 850 BC	c. 400 BC	About 400 yrs	643	95%
Herodotus	c. 450 BC	c. 900 AD	About 1350 yrs	8	
Euripides	c. 440 BC	c. 1100 AD	About 1500 yrs	9	Not
Thucydides	c. 420 BC	c. 900 AD	About 1300 yrs	8	Enough
Plato	c. 380 BC	c. 900 AD	About 1300 yrs	7	Copies
Aristotle	c. 350 BC	c. 1100 AD	About 1400 yrs	5	To
Caesar	c. 60 BC	c. 900 AD	About 950 yrs	10	Reconstruct
Catullus	c. 50 BC	c. 1500 AD	About 1600 yrs	3	The
Tacitus	c. 100 AD	c. 1100 AD	About 1000 yrs	20	Original
New Testament	c. 60 AD	c. 125 AD	About 40 yrs	> 20,000	99.5%

The age of the manuscripts is also excellent. Possibly the oldest manuscript is a scrap of papyrus (p52) containing John 18:31-33, 37-38, dating from AD 125-130, no more than 40 years after John's gospel was likely written. A non-Christian scholar, Carsten Peter Thiede even claims that he has dated a fragment of Matthew to about 60 AD. By comparing the ancient manuscripts, we find that the vast majority of variations are minor elements of spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of words or phrases. Only about 400 (less than one page of an English translation) have any significant bearing on the meaning of a passage, and most are footnoted in Modern English translations. Overall, 97-99% of the NT can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and no Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually disputed passages.

The Scripture quoted in the works of the early Christian writers (most 95-150 AD) are so extensive that virtually the entire New Testament can be reconstructed except for 11 verses, mostly from 2 and 3 John.

Critics of the accuracy of the Bible routinely claimed that it was in fact a series of fables and legends that had developed over hundreds of years because there were not enough copies of ancient manuscripts to alleviate their skepticism. Curiously, a simple shepherd boy dealt a death blow to their criticisms in 1947. He wandered into a cave in the Middle East and discovered large pottery jars filled with leather scrolls that had been wrapped in linen cloth. The ancient copies of the books of the Bible were in good condition despite their age and harsh climate, because they had been well sealed for nearly 1900 years. What is now known as The Dead Sea Scrolls are made up of some 40,000 inscribed ancient fragments. From these fragments more than 500 books have been reconstructed, including Old Testament books such as a complete copy of Isaiah.

Simply, if someone disputes the trustworthiness of the New Testament, to be consistent they would also have to dismiss virtually the entire canon of western literature, pulling everything from Homer to Plato and Aristotle off of bookstore shelves and out of classroom discussions.

**Test #2 – The Internal Test:** Each book of the Bible is a witness to a body of truth, and much like a legal case in our day; if a witness were to contradict themselves then their testimony should not be deemed trustworthy.

No other world religion or cult can present any specific prophecies concerning the coming of their prophets. However in the Bible we see hundreds of fulfilled prophecies extending hundreds, and sometimes over a thousand years into the future. Consider the following prophecies and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ:

1. Born of a woman (Gen. 3:15 cf. Mt. 1:20; Gal. 4:4)
2. Descendant of Abraham (Gen. 22:18 cf. Mt. 1:1; Gal. 3:16)
3. Born of a virgin (Is. 7:14 cf. Mt. 1:18)
4. Born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2 cf. Luke 2:1-7)
5. Prophesied by the forerunner John the Baptist (Is. 40; Mal. 3:1 cf. Jn. 1:19-52)
6. Rejected by his own people (Is. 53 cf. Jn. 1)
7. Presented as a king riding a donkey (Zech. 9:9 cf. Lk. 19:35-37)
8. Betrayed by a friend (Ps. 41:9 cf. Mt. 26:50)
9. Betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12 cf. 26:15)
10. Blood money thrown on temple floor & used to buy a potter's field (Zech. 11:13 cf. Mt. 27:5-7)  
**Note:** the temple was destroyed in 70 AD so the Messiah must have come prior to then.
11. Crucified (Ps. 22:16 cf. Lk 23:33)  
**Note:** crucifixion didn't exist until hundreds of years after Psalms was written
12. Crucified with thieves (Isa. 53:12 cf. Mt. 27:38)
13. Forsaken by God (Ps. 22:1 cf. Mt. 27:46)
14. Lots cast for His clothing (Ps. 22:18 cf. Jn. 19:23)
15. Buried in a rich man's tomb (Isa. 53:9 cf. Mt. 27:57)
16. Resurrected & exalted (Ps. 16:10, Isa. 52:13, 53:10-12 cf. Acts 2:25-32)
17. Ascended into heaven (Ps. 68:18 cf. Acts 1:8, Eph. 4:8).

The Bible is clearly a book of history and not just philosophy because it continually promises concrete historical events that in time come to pass exactly as promised. These promises show the divine inspiration of the Bible, and their fulfillment proves that there is a God who rules over human history and brings events to pass just as He ordains them. Because of these facts, we can trust the internal consistency of the Bible to be a chorus of faithful witnesses who sing together in harmony.

**Test #3 – The Historical Test:** The historicity of Jesus and events surrounding the time of his life has been well established by early Roman, Greek, and Jewish sources. Such ancient historians include Flavius Josephus, Mara BarSerapion, Cornelius Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Lucian, and the Jewish Talmud. Simply, when the New Testament mentions such historical facts as rulers, nations, people groups, political events, and the existence of Jesus, non-Christian historical sources confirm the accuracy of the New Testament accounts. For further evidence regarding the historical accuracy of Scripture, see Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.

### **Why Are There Different Bible Translations?**

In translating the Bible into English, three general categories of translation are most common: word for word translations, thought for thought translations, and paraphrases. The same three options are also used in the translation of other ancient books into English.

Word for word translations make a special effort to carefully interpret each word from their original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic into English. Word for word translations tend to be the best for studying because of their accuracy, though they sometimes lose the poetic nuances of the original languages. Probably the best word for word translations are the New American Standard Bible (NASB), English Standard Version (ESV), and the New King James Version (NKJV). The King James Version (KJV) is also a word for word translation but because of its' use of old English it is very difficult for some people to read.

Thought for thought translations attempt to convey the full nuances of a passage by interpreting the scriptures entire meaning and not just the individual words. Thought for thought translations may include words that were not included in the originals in an effort to give the same meaning that the reader of the original languages would have had. The best and most widely read thought for thought English translation is the New International Version (NIV).

Paraphrased translations pay even less attention to specific word meanings than thought for thought translations in an attempt to give the poetic or narrative essence of a passage. For this reason, many paraphrased translations do not even have verses in them. Examples of paraphrased translations include The Message, The New Living Bible, and The Amplified Bible.

Some translations are very poor and we would not recommend that they be used as credible translations for study. These include the Jehovah's Witness translation called the New World Translation, which was written by editors with no working knowledge of the original languages. We would also not recommend current politically correct attempts to remove the masculine names for God in Bibles like the New Revised Standard Version.

Since each style of translation has different strengths and weaknesses it is best for students of the Bible to use multiple translations that include word for word, thought for thought, and paraphrase versions to gain a fuller insight into the Scriptures. Generally, it is best to use the ESV, NAS, and NIV as your primary study versions.

## THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

"canon" *n.* =  
from the Greek word  
*kanon*: "ruler, rule,  
standard, or  
model; a  
criterion of  
judgment."



"canon" - not cannon"

The Canon of Scripture are the books which comprise the Bible. How were the books of the Bible chosen? Were the wrong books chosen and valuable books omitted? This is a complex subject on which we will not spend enough time.

The New Testament books were 'received' (the term used by the early church) based on several criteria: (1) apostolic authorship or endorsement was important; (2) they must be received as authoritative by the early church; and (3) they must be in harmony with the books about which there was no doubt.

Although the vast majority of the books of the New Testament were clearly considered authoritative, several books in the Bible were initially questioned. Two or three books were considered and then omitted. Those omitted were left out because they were not written by apostles, and the writers themselves acknowledged that their authority was subordinate to the apostles.

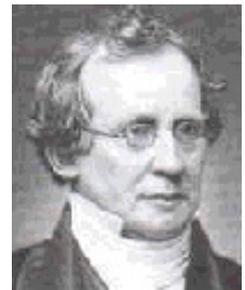
There is disagreement between Protestants and Catholics on the authority of seven books, called the “Apocrypha.” These books were written in the period between Malachi and the events of the New Testament. These books were never considered to be authoritative by the Jews, but are considered to be history on the level of other secular history. There are problems with these books: (1) all but two are anonymous; (2) they do not claim to be authoritative; (3) they are not quoted by Jesus in the gospels or by other New Testament writers. They only became part of the Catholic Bible in 1546 at the Council of Trent.

### **Can Scripture be written today?**

Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us that God has spoken to us through Jesus and that we have no need of any more revelation beyond what was recorded of His life and work and the subsequent apostolic explanation. The Book of Revelation deals with the end of all things and tells us to expect no more Scripture than what we already have (Rev. 22:18-19). Any new book of the Bible would require eyewitness verification, absolute consistency with the rest of Scripture, and perfect prophecy without any error. We would also have to assume that God had some pertinent revelation that He has withheld from His people for the past 2000 years that He has for some reason now decided to make known. Lastly, the Scriptures warn us of adding to them (Dt. 4:2; Prov. 30:5-6).

### **Interpreting the Bible**

How is the Bible to be read? Again, a longer treatment is needed, and some good resources are cited at the end of the Chapter. But Charles Hodge, in his Systematic Theology cited three primary rules of interpretation:



**Charles Hodge**

“If every man has the right and is bound to read the Scriptures and to judge for himself what they teach, he must have certain rules to guide him in the exercise of this privilege and duty. These rules are not arbitrary. They are not imposed by human authority. They have no binding force, which does not flow from their own intrinsic truth and propriety. They are few and simple:

(1) The words of Scripture are to be taken in their plain historical sense. That is, they must be taken in the sense attached to them in the age and by the people to whom they were addressed. This assumes that the sacred writers were honest and meant to be understood.

(2) If the scriptures be what they claim to be, the Word of God, they are the work of one mind, and that mind divine. From this it follows that Scripture cannot contradict Scripture. God cannot teach in one place anything that is inconsistent with what He teaches in another. Hence Scripture must explain

Scripture. If a passage admits of different interpretations, the true one will agree with what the Bible teaches elsewhere on the same subject.

(3) The scriptures are to be interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which guidance is to be humbly and earnestly sought. The Spirit is promised as a guide and teacher. He was to come to lead the people of God into the knowledge of the truth.”

There are a number of good helpful rules that can aid the reader in understanding particular literary forms used in Scripture, such as understanding parallelisms used in poetry, interpreting Jesus’ parables and so forth. Read a good book on Biblical interpretation.

### **Dispensationalism**

Within conservative Protestantism there is a basic question of approach to Biblical interpretation. Reformed readers see the Scriptures as a unity, while another group of interpreters, the Dispensationalists, see the Scriptures as divided into separate periods, or dispensations. Dispensationalism is relatively new, traceable to Irish Anglican clergyman John Nelson Darby in the 1830’s, then to the 1909 publication of C.I. Scofield’s Reference Bible. Dispensationalist expositors include Scofield, Charles Ryrie and Dallas Seminary.

A text frequently cited by Dispensationalists is II Timothy 2:15, “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing (the NIV says ‘handling’) the word of truth.” Dispensationalists have interpreted this verse to mean that the Bible presents sharply divided parts called dispensations. Scofield defined a dispensation as “a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.” Correctly interpreting the Bible means correctly dividing these dispensations from one another. Scofield defined seven epochs in the Bible (Scofield Reference Bible, note to Genesis 1:28). Other Dispensationalists have found more than seven, some no more than two dispensations.

Dispensationalist and non-Dispensationalist theologians alike would agree that God has revealed His plan progressively. People in later ages knew more of God than those of earlier periods. Paul says that he has come to make known a new administration of God not known to men of other ages (Ephesians 3:2-9). The writer of Hebrews says that God spoke to the people in former times by prophets, but has now spoken through the son (Hebrews 1:1-2). God has worked differently in different ages.

However, unlike non-Dispensationalists, Dispensationalists divide sections into areas that sharply contrast or even conflict with one another. John Gerstner has observed that “Genuine biblical revelation is developmental; one stage unfolds naturally from another as the unfolding of the blossom of a flower.” But for Dispensationalists, these periods are sharply divided rather than integrated, and they conflict rather than harmonize. “Divide” is a sharper term than Paul’s original requires, and Dispensationalists have made it sharper still, “a veritable scissors separation of one part from another.” (John H. Gerstner, *A Primer on Dispensationalism*, P&R Publishing, 1982)

Calvin's Institutes contains a chapter dedicated to the differences between Old and New Testaments, and another dedicated to their similarities. However, there is no sharp break in God's interaction with man in any time period. Reformed thinkers believe that the patterns of God's work are generally consistent throughout time.

In its extreme forms, Dispensationalism causes confusion because the divisions mean that not all Scripture is applicable to us today. In particular, Dispensationalists do not give adequate consideration to the continuity of the Old and New Testaments. For example, is the Old Testament applicable to us? Are Christians today completely free of all obligations to obey the Law, since the Law was a part of the Old Testament dispensation? Do Christians still have any obligation to tithe if tithing is not discussed in the New Testament? There are other questions raised. Some Dispensationalists seem to portray God as trying different approaches to humanity in different ages hoping to find something that will work, and God is surprised and disappointed when the latest dispensation does not stick. Of course not all Dispensationalist interpreters take these positions.

While we agree with Dispensationalists on the absolute authority of Scripture and our utter dependence on free grace in Jesus Christ, Dispensationalists may disagree with certain positions historically taken by the Reformed church, based on different approaches to Scripture. For instance, Dispensationalists may disagree with some or all of the following positions frequently adopted by Reformed believers:

1. The kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ, and Christ is presently reigning as king;
2. The church is the manifestation of Christ's kingdom in the present age;
3. The people of God under the old covenant and the new are one people;
4. God's purpose and plan has been consistent from the creation until the consummation;
5. Even though we are justified by grace alone through faith alone, God's moral law is still incumbent upon Christians;
6. The church will be present in the world at the consummation (I Corinthians 15:52 and Revelation 11:15).

Dispensationalists are fellow Christians. They have done wonderful things for God's Kingdom. However, their method of interpreting Scripture differs from the interpretation of the Reformed tradition because they do not give adequate consideration to the continuity of Scripture, particularly the Old and New Testaments.

**For Further Reading:**

The Origin of the Bible, edited by Philip Comfort, is a good introduction to the authority and perfection of Scripture from a team of good theologians.

The New Testament Documents: Are the reliable? by F.F. Bruce is a short but great demonstration of Scripture's reliability.

Christ and the Bible, by John Wenhan, is a very helpful survey of how Jesus Christ viewed the Old Testament.

The Canon of Scripture, by F.F. Bruce, is a thorough book on how the 66 books of the Protestant canon came to be.

From Ancient Text to Modern Translations, by David Ewart, is a very helpful and thorough book surveying how the Bible went from the hands of the original authors to the Bible we hold in our hand today.

Are the New Testament Documents Reliable, by F.F. Bruce, is a good survey of the accuracy and credibility of the New Testament.

The Indestructible Book, by Ken Connolly, is a fascinating historical look at how the Scriptures have been both opposed and adored over the ages.

Getting the Message, by Daniel Doriani, provides insight, guidance, and practical wisdom for studying the Scriptures.

What the Bible is All About, by Henrietta Means, is a good book-by-book overview of the Bible.

Case for Christ by Lee Strobel is an apologetic for the entire faith but has a section specifically on the Bible.

#### **Additional resources:**

James Montgomery Boice, Does Inerrancy Matter?, International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1979, which contains Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, also available on the web at <http://www.gty.org/~phil/creeds/chicago.htm>

Daniel M. Doriani, Getting the Message - A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible, P&R Publishing, 1996.

John H. Gerstner, A Primer on Dispensationalism, P&R Publishing, 1982

Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Abridged Edition, P&R Publishing, 1992, pages 75-98

Vern S. Poythress, Understanding Dispensationalists, Zondervan, 1987.

R.C. Sproul, Essential Truths of the Christian Faith, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992, Part I, pages 3-28.

Edward J. Young, Thy Word Is Truth, Eerdmans, 1957.

### **THE BIG PICTURE: QUESTIONS**

1-1. Describe each step in the biblical story line (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consumation).

1-2. Give an example or two of how we are in an “already / not yet” state of redemption.

1-3. Respond to the criticism that the Bible is mostly legend, citing both timing and content of scripture.

1-4. How would you respond to the charge that our current copies of scripture cannot be relied upon as true to the original manuscripts?

1-5. Give 4 Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ which are most persuasive and astounding to you.

1-6. What do we mean when we say that the Scriptures are inspired by God?

1-7. What do we mean when we say that Scripture is inerrant? Is this the same as saying that we take the Bible literally?

1-8. What is the “canon” of Scripture?

1-9. What is the method of interpreting Scripture used by Dispensationalists?