

How to Read the Bible

By Ronald L. Dart

I forget where I first saw the book titled, *How to Read the Bible*, but I recall a certain amusement. I thought, "Find a comfortable chair, open the book, and read." I think there may be a dozen books in print with that title, but a short review by the features editor of *First Things* was very useful in understanding what at least one of the authors was driving at. The article was titled, "The Bible, Inside and Out," by R.R. Reno.

Professor Reno noted that, "To this day, modern biblical scholars ignore all interpreters of the Bible except other modern biblical scholars." I had noticed that, but had never put my finger on it. What caught his interest was the book by James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. Kugel became Starr Professor of Hebrew, but "he never really worked as a normal biblical critic in the modern mode. Early on he cultivated an expertise in the old readers of the Bible, the interpreters who were so crucial in the origins of Judaism and Christianity.

"Immersed in the work of early interpreters, Kugel noticed a strange feature of modern biblical study. The critics today seem to

have a great appetite for any new piece of evidence or striking theoretical insight that promises a fresh approach to the Bible. One could say quite literally that no stone has been left unturned. Except one: To this day, modern biblical scholars ignore all interpreters of the Bible except other modern biblical scholars."

I first noticed this myself when doing research into the higher criticism of the Old Testament. I think it is a function of the way academia works and the necessity of getting published. "James Kugel identifies four assumptions that all ancient readers implicitly adopted, none of which find welcome in the modern approach."

In a recent program, I examined these assumptions that relate to how one reads the Bible:

1. The Bible taught "lessons directly to readers in their own day."

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

How to Read the Bible	1
Because You Give	1
My Modest Proposal	2
Memorial Day Family Retreat	2
In Memory	4
Calendar of Events	4
Radio Update	4
Special Offer	4

2. Ancient readers "believed that the entire Bible is essentially a divinely given text." (Call it inspiration, infallibility or whatever you want, but the point is fairly obvious. Ancient Jews and Christians wanted to live in accord with God's will, which could hardly be done by way of old books unless they took them to be divinely authorized for that purpose.)
3. The Bible has no contradictions or mistakes.

continued on page 3. . .

Because You Give. . .

People are blessed. A lady wrote, "Dear Brother Dart, thank you so much for your teaching and the DVDs you send. I appreciate them and if I were able, I would send money for them. I only have \$365 a month Social Security and it just barely meets my needs. I thank you again and again. Blessings to you and all in your ministry" (VA). When you give to CEM, you help those who can't afford to give.

My Modest Proposal

By Lenny Cacchio

Ideas have consequences. That's why doctrine is central to Christianity. It's true that Christianity is about behavior and relationships, and those are important things, but doctrine has a special place because it's the lens through which we define how we act and how we relate.

A great example might be how you view the path to salvation. If you believe there are many paths to salvation, your approach to evangelizing the Christian message will be radically different than one who believes that Jesus is the only way.

If you believe salvation comes from keeping a set of rules and rituals, you'll make different choices than someone who believes that salvation comes from God's mercy.

If you believe that everything, including salvation vs. damnation, is predestined from the beginning, you'll relate to God and live your life differently than you will if you accept the concept of free will.

If you doubt the existence of evil and what is sometimes called the depravity of the human race, you'll be more likely to accept Kim Jong Il or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a negotiating partner.

In spite of the centrality of doctrine to Christianity, many Christians don't know the Bible, are confused by doctrine, and in fact minimize the importance of doctrine in their Christian walk. Preachers are often reticent to preach on doctrine, on the theory that doctrine can divide, and barring that, doctrine can offend. In one sense people can be like those in Isaiah's day who said, "Proph-

esy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits" (Isaiah 30:10). Doctrine can be mighty unpleasant sometimes because it often demands changes in our lives. Preachers have an obligation to preach the truth in due season, even if it hurts.

There is another reason why doctrine is absent from too many pulpits. Teaching doctrine can be a heavy exercise for both speaker and audience. It takes busy time in the leather, comparing of Scriptures, and honest exegesis. Who wants to go to church and work?

I would propose that it doesn't need to be that way. Jesus taught doctrine and a lot of it. Sometimes he referred to Scripture ("Have you not read. . ."). Other times he taught doctrine by means of allegory, which we commonly call parables. Sometimes his listeners understood, and sometimes they didn't, but his illustrations hinted at some heavy doctrine for those who were able to see. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is not only a touching story, it also illustrates some heavy truths about sin and servitude, forgiveness and redemption.

Jesus' Parable of the Fig Tree (Luke 21:29-33) teaches us some things about what to look for regarding the return of Christ. Jesus taught about the doctrine of prayer through parables (Luke 19:1-14) and used the same occasion to teach about faith.

All I'm saying is that doctrine need not be dry. In fact it should be about the most exhilarating,

exciting, and comforting aspect of Christian teaching. What can be more important than answering the key questions of life: Who am I, where did I come from, and where am I going? Teach it as Jesus did: by example and by story.

Memorial Day Family Retreat

By Pam Dewey

The Bible Times Bazaar for all the kids in 2007 made many wonder if the 2008 Retreat could meet that standard. The consensus by the end of the weekend was—indeed it could and did! A Meet and Greet began the Retreat Friday evening with a subs-and-chips meal for all at the pavilion at Paris Landing State Park. A rousing sing-along of contemporary Christian praise music, led by Skip Martin on his guitar, followed.

Inspiring and stimulating seminars began at 9:00 Sabbath morning with a Brainstorming Session. More inspirational and educational seminars, and fun-packed YEA classes for youth, followed at 10 a.m. each day. A Sabbath worship service featured Ron Dart for the sermon.

The main activity of the weekend was "Meet Me At the Fair" which was held Saturday evening in conjunction with the Pie and Ice Cream social. The theme

continued on page 4 . . .

*How to Read the Bible
continued from page 1 . . .*

4. Hidden meanings must be ferreted out by all sorts of creative interpretive strategies.

These are the four basic assumptions of all the ancient readers of the Bible, Jews or Christians. Take the first assumption as an example: The Bible taught lessons directly to readers in their own day. To me, this seems fairly obvious. When Paul wrote his two letters to the Corinthians, who can argue that they weren't intended to be understood by the saints at Corinth. And when you read the Gospel accounts, the same thing appears if you read carefully. Each of the writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, had a readership in mind. I have no reason to believe that they expected their readers to show up a thousand years later. In the program, I submit two New Testament passages to illustrate how this worked.

This is a little more obvious in the New Testament than it is in, say, the prophets. But even in the prophets, it is important to know how the people who heard these men preach understood what they were saying. After all, we know that Jeremiah went down to the city gate and preached to the people there, so they understood what he was saying—at least in their own context.

If you use a computer at all, you find your screen loaded with little images. Each icon is designed to call up a series of commands needed to accomplish a task on the screen. If it weren't for the effective use of icons, computers would be far more difficult to use

and the instructions insufferably complex. The icons suggest what it is that they do—as the tiny printer on the screen suggests that if you click on it, you will start the process of printing your document.

There are no pictures in the Bible, but there are icons, nonetheless. I call them verbal icons. As an example, give the first few verses of Zechariah 5 a quick read. The prophet was shown a flying scroll. That means next to nothing to the modern reader, but the first people to read it probably understood it to be a symbol of judgment. That it was flying and that it was huge probably conveyed the idea that it wasn't going to be long in coming and that it was going to be a very big event. If you were into the language and the culture, you probably wouldn't have to be told that the scroll is a curse.

With this information in hand, when you come to the Book of Revelation, and you encounter a scroll sealed with seven seals, you should immediately think of some bad times ahead. The verbal icon calls images and ideas to mind that don't have to be explained in any great detail. The reader is prepared for what is to follow.

For me, I think this addresses and validates the first assumption: the Bible taught “lessons directly to readers in their own day.” If you keep that in mind, you will understand the Bible much better.

The second assumption is that ancient readers believed that the entire Bible is essentially a divinely given text. In fact, unless we do take the books of the Bible that way, we have no idea of how to live in accord with God's will.

Never mind all the arguments about the method of inspiration. The ancient readers read the Bible as a divinely given text. Modern readers too often do not, and they end up with no foundation for belief. So how does one lay this foundation?

A person who wants to decide how to take the Bible should start with Matthew. Then read Mark, then Luke, then John. At that point, a person must decide if she believes the witnesses or not. If not, she should call herself an agnostic and give it up. Perhaps later, God will address her ignorance in a way she can understand. That is not an insult. Ignorance means you don't know.

Once a person has addressed the four witnesses of Jesus' life, works, message, death, and resurrection, he is ready to read the rest of the Bible, because Jesus affirmed it. Then the question as one reads is, “How does this text speak to me? What does it tell me about God and myself?”

The third assumption is that the Bible has no contradictions or mistakes. This follows naturally from the second assumption. If the Bible is a divinely given text, and if we have a desire to live within God's will, then we can trust his revelation of that will. If there appears to be contradictions, that may grow out of our own limitations, or out of some faulty assumptions.

Professor Reno cites Baruch de Spinoza, a European Jewish theologian of the 17th century. According to Spinoza, Scripture should always be assumed to mean (unless clearly proven otherwise) exactly and literally what it says. Spinoza states this rather baldly,

continued on page 4 . . .

*How to Read the Bible
continued from page 3 . . .*

and there are, oddly, any number of fundamentalists (Jewish and Christian) who take the same tack, along with many scholars.

Literalism is a great enemy of understanding the Bible. Shall I give you an example? Here's a simple commandment from the Law of Moses: "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn" (Deuteronomy 25:4).

I don't have an ox, and there is now an entirely different way of threshing grain. Spinoza might conclude that this law is not eternally valid, but was only applicable to the people living then and at that level of technology. Up to a point, that sounds reasonable. But, the Apostle Paul cited this Scripture as an authority in his first letter to the Corinthians, applies it to contemporary issues, states just as baldly as Spinoza that it was

written "for our sakes."

Paul cited the Law of Moses as authority for teaching the church they should fairly compensate their pastors. So, for Paul, this limited way of reading the Bible is not correct. He takes the principle of the Law as applicable in all generations to all men. What one should look for in reading the Bible is the principle.

There is much more, but space doesn't permit developing it here. Rather, use the enclosed card to order a *FREE* CD of the program, *How to Read the Bible*. You may be surprised to learn that it is somewhat more than finding a comfortable chair, opening the book, and beginning to read.

The CD is *FREE*, but please don't forget us as you plan your giving. We are touching lives far and wide with the truth of Scripture, and the fuel that keeps us going is the donations of our friends.

Special Offer

No prophet's work has been sung more than Isaiah's. Ronald L. Dart reads the entire Book of Isaiah with background music and enhanced with thoughtful commentary for your enlightenment, edification, and inspiration. The eight CD album regularly priced at \$37.95 has been discounted to \$27.95, or you can have the MP3 version for only \$16.95. God has spoken these words through the Prophet Isaiah, and when God speaks we should listen.

In Memory

Christian Educational Ministries gratefully acknowledges the generous donation made in memory of Jim Ussery, an ordained minister. Our heartfelt sympathy and prayers go out to Dot, his wife of many years, and his five children.

*Memorial Day Family Retreat
continued from page 2 . . .*

was a "turn of the last century" county fair. Several weddings and other conflicting activities cut the attendance considerably this year, but there was still a crowd of over 100 enthusiastic fair-goers.

Calendar of Events

North Little Rock, Arkansas

- Ronald L. Dart will be the guest speaker for the Sabbath Worship Service at the Church of God Central AR, 41st and Division St., in the Community of Christ Building, June 14 at 11:15 a.m. For more information call the church voicemail at 501-753-6684 or Larry Watkins at 1-888-BIBLE-44.

Springfield, MO - Meet the Teacher at the Lamplighter Inn, 2820 N. Glenstone, Missouri #2 Conference Room at 2:00 p.m. June 21, 2008. There are two Lamplighter Inns in Springfield. This one is located just south of I-44 and next to the Steak'n Shake. For more information call Mike or Gloria Anderson at 417-833-0977 or Larry Watkins at 1-888-BIBLE-44.



Radio Update

Sacramento, CA
KFIA 710 AM
M-F 5:30 a.m.
Sunday 6:00 a.m.

Statesville, NC
WCIS 1400 AM
Sunday 8:30 a.m.

Teaneck, NJ
WVNJ 1160 AM
Sunday 12:00 p.m. (noon)

Christian Educational Ministries

PO Box 560
Whitehouse, Texas 75791
phone: 1.888.BIBLE.44
fax: 903.839.9311
email: adm@borntowin.net
website: www.borntowin.net

*That the man of God may be proficient
and equipped for every good work.*