



Scripture - the Spirit's Tool

Learning From the Bible

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A [PDF download](#) on Spirithome's pages on Scripture.

The Spirit reveals God's purposes thru the Bible

The sacred page is not meant to be the end, but only the means
toward the end, which is knowing God himself.

A. W. Tozer

Why Read Scripture?

It is said that you study the Bible to know God. But the truth is, you *won't* fully know God. Think of another mystery about knowing someone else: about how you never really, fully get to know your friends, your children, or your spouse. There's always the unexpected, the surprise, the seemingly out-of-character action, something new, or something that's been there all along but you didn't notice it or it hadn't come up before. A complete knowledge of anyone (including yourself) is a mystery that's out of human reach. Yet, *you do in a sense, know them*: you develop an understanding in which you have far more than enough trust to go by as you relate to them. **The same is true of knowing**

God -- only, God is so complex it boggles the mind. **God does not remove the mystery, but through Scripture you can develop that same kind of understanding, solidarity, and trust.** Not just a 'basic' knowledge, either; you can understand God and divine purposes with awesome depth. You can learn enough to grasp who God is, what God's about, how a life of following Jesus can be lived out, and where it's headed. Enough to catch the virus of God's good news and have it lodge itself in every cell. Not a full comprehension of the relationship, but an apprehension of it that's more than enough for it to be not only God's way, but yours too. Through the Bible, far more than anywhere else, the Spirit reveals what God is up to so you can recognize when it's happening around you and within you, and then move forward.

What the Scriptures Are Not

There are lots of ways the Bible has been brought into our lives. Some of those are popular, but have little or nothing to do with its purpose.

- The Scriptures were *not* written, gathered, and kept over the years just to be a bin for holding grand truths and stories with morals that have good effects.
- Though anyone can be led by the Spirit to find in it answers to many great mysteries, and even find from it the right questions to ask, it's *not* a question book or an answer book, and only for brief moments does it use question-and-answer methods.
- It's *not* a moot court for hypothetical cases. It doesn't put a question out there to see what the thinkers of the day see in it, as is often true with the Talmud.
- The Bible's *not* firstly a book about mysteries or wisdom or morality or dogma; at heart, it's not even a book about religion.
- It's *not* enough to study Scripture well, or to be able to remember a scriptural section or verse at any given moment, or to have supposed mastery of scriptural subjects or of the text.

The Scriptures as a Library

You might develop strength of character from its examples, pattern your life according to the moral values in it, and even impact the world with something it taught you. That's worked for over a billion people over the years. **But that's not why it's there.** Scripture was written with a very different purpose in mind: the Spirit uses it to *reveal the purpose, vision, and love of God*, and to start, shape, and deepen faith in Christ. The Spirit made it to show how Christ recreated our relationship with God. When you read it without faith, you miss the whole point of having it. The Scriptures are great because of the Great One who stands behind it and that Great One's love for us, a love that came to us, suffered death, and overcame even death so that we might also overcome it. **The medium (of print or speech or Web) is not the message; the God who Reveals is the message**, and the medium is the messenger. Even more, the message is that of a love letter, not that of a rap sheet or a facts list. And like with a love letter, it's not so much how it's said than Who says it and why.

Another viewpoint is found in the **Evangelical Covenant Church's** [Resource Paper](#) on how they read Scripture.

"Perhaps there will be many Christians to whom it would not occur to pose the question whether the process of secularization has anything to do with the biblical understanding of the goal of history. The Bible, for them, belongs to a religious world which is not admitted to belong to the world of secular events... But this is to read the Bible wrongly. Whatever else it may be, the Bible is a secular book dealing with the sort of events which a news editor accepts for publication in a daily newspaper; it is concerned with secular events, wars, revolutions, enslavements and liberations, migrants and refugees, famines and epidemics and all the rest... We miss this because we do not sufficiently treat the Bible as a whole. When we do this, we see at once that the Bible... is in its main design a universal history. It is an interpretation of human history as a whole, [beginning](#) with the saga of creation and ending with a vision of the gathering together of all the nations and the consummation of God's purpose for mankind."
 ----- **Lesslie Newbigin**, *[*Honest Religion for Secular Man*](#)*

Thirst to Know

To learn of God requires that you *thirst* to find out. It's the same thirst you have for learning your lover, or the field of work you most want to do. Knowing plenty is not good enough; there's always more, better, more robust and full. Keep reading, keep listening to others when they communicate about what Scripture says. One teacher will speak of its [beauty](#), another of its plan, yet another of its [usefulness](#), and still another about its ugly parts and puzzles. Maybe one Bible verse will teach Scripture's gospel heart, while another will overturn the tables on your misunderstandings or how you're being cowardly in applying it. Maybe someone will puncture your excess zeal, or show how you put off doing what God is calling you to do, or thank you for doing it right. But you have to *thirst*. You don't have to spend 24/7 on it -- that would seriously get in the way of why you're thirsting. But be intentional - be eager to learn. And be disciplined - many folks have taken on the discipline of daily scripture readings, not as a law, but as a good habit. Remember that 'consensus' is a somewhat-informed, commonly-held opinion that's *begging to be challenged*. Question, challenge, wrestle, and sometimes even insistently reject what you hear. *Doubt your knowledge, doubt your doubts, and don't believe everything that you think*. Trust instead that the Spirit is at work, and it is this same Spirit that communicates through the Bible beyond and above anything else. **God wants you to know**. The One you thirst to know is the One who loves you so much that you have been made a part of the coming party. What's not to love about that?

How Can Scripture Teach Me?

But how do you [learn from the Bible](#)? The very idea of learning important stuff about God can be intimidating. But you can do it. There are more details elsewhere on this site, but it boils down to this:

- study it yourself;
- study it with others;

- live how the Spirit leads you by it;
- live it out with others, especially (but not only) others who are living it out.

Your mind will change as you learn - if it doesn't, then you're not learning. You will live differently as you mature in your faith. You *will* make mistakes. **Many** mistakes. That's okay, you can make them, just don't hold on to them or fear them, for that's part of the learning process. You learn from your mistakes. You will also stir up nastier sides of yourself, perhaps even using what you read to bolster evils within you. But, don't fear that, either, because: (1) you can turn away from these sort of wrongs, and (2) God forgives, and provides a new start. The Spirit's guidance means you have no reason to fear the Scriptures.

The Scriptures Speak, and Stuff Happens

It's often said in mainline Protestant churches that the Bible is only the Word of God when it is read with faith. I myself would not put it quite that way. It seems to me that there is something [inherent](#) about the Scriptures that is the Spirit's own, in a way unlike anything else. Christians acknowledge this in saying that the Spirit [inspired](#) the actual writings and speeches (such as by the [prophets](#), story-tellers and **editors**) that led to the writings. If so, much of the Spirit's greatness would have rubbed off on it. One way to see if it's so is to see if it bears a key mark of God's Word: **it does not come back empty**. Do the books of the Scriptures (the Bible canon) meet this standard even in non-believers' hands? Yes. For all of this modern culture's disbelief and cynical bitterness, it's not at all rare to see [the Scripture's effect](#). Even in the hands on those who don't believe in Christ or even in a god, whether in art or literature, diplomacy or politics, [family life](#) or inner transcendent longings, and whenever people speak of peace or justice or morality or character or [vision](#), something of the Word's words, meanings, ethics, and intents do in fact come through. Sometimes those doing it have no idea where it came from; sometimes they know full well and ignore or reject God but still learn from the truths God put into Scriptures. It does not come back empty.

Read It With **Attitude**

The Scriptures scream to be read with faith. But it really matters what faith one has. Case in point: Saul of Tarsus. He had read the Hebrew Scriptures all his life long. He was even trained in the school of thought and practice which was slowly developing what would eventually become the Talmud. He thoroughly believed in God -- not just any god, but the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and of David -- and probably believed strongly enough to give up his life if need be (a very real possibility in Roman times). **By all the standards of Scripture** as revealed up to Jesus' time, he was following God as he should have. But those standards had been radically changed only a few years earlier, and God set about to break through all that Saul knew. God didn't use Scripture to make the breakthrough. There was no New Testament yet to bear the new Word, since people were still busy *living* the New Testament. So God created an experience that would open Saul up to the truth: Saul was blinded. When his blindness ended, he had new eyes for seeing what had already been revealed in a new light: a new Word from God, Jesus. Saul was no longer Saul, but Paul, an apostle. And Paul went on to live,

and write, that new revelation, as the author of letters and as the foremost evangelist of all. The light that the Spirit shed through Paul's life and pen, in turn, now lights our way.

One part of a good attitude toward Scripture is to read it with passion. In 2010 in Capetown, the [Third Lausanne Congress](#) expressed it as loving Scripture like its pages were love letters from the one you love, "not for the paper they are, but for the person who speaks through them." They further expressed this love, for:

- The Person Scripture reveals, as "the [primary](#) witness to the Lord Jesus Christ".
- The story the Scriptures tell, which is "for all people on earth".
- The truth the Scriptures teach, which is "the foundation for exploring and understanding all dimensions of God's truth".
- The life its God calls for, for "nothing commends the gospel more eloquently than a transformed life".

**The Scriptures are the floor we stand on,
the floor we worship on,
the floor we dance on.
And we can leap, and perchance even to fly.
But betides we come back to the floor,
for it is our home.**

Free In Christ

A reader writes:

You wrote that "Experiences that are not found in Scripture can be Christian, so long as they adhere to the gospel as found in Scripture, and to Paul's concerns for order, and can be tested by all the means of discernment at our disposal." Where does Scripture say this?

Some people say, "if it's not in Scripture, it's not Christian". That would be to miss the whole point of Scripture. Scripture was not meant to be the bare limit of what we can do in the faith. If it were, we couldn't [worship](#) the way we do, we couldn't be organized in congregations (as we know them) or denominations, and we certainly couldn't use the Internet. Our work, play, art, romance, political systems, music recordings, and "[nuclear family](#)" would rarely be able to be put to use for God. The truth is, *Scripture simply doesn't directly cover such things, and isn't meant to.* Scripture is there to teach you about Christ and what it means to follow him. It gives you ways to sift and evaluate, and helps you develop a God-pleasing way of looking at the world within you and around you. Scripture shows you the way God works so you know it when you see it, or when you do it.

The apostle Paul speaks of Christian freedom, that we are not saved by following Law (Romans 8).

All is permitted in Christ, but not all is good or right (1 Cor 6). Scripture teaches you what good and right are, what evil and wrong are, what the fruit are, what the commands are. But new things are happening all the time. Through the Scriptures, God gave us ways to [discern](#) how and where [the Spirit](#) is leading us, mostly by showing us what God is up to. We have to [test our experiences](#): how does it reflect, or help us reflect, the gospel or the love of Christ, how does it help us become Christlike, how is God's will for the human race, or for you, furthered by this? If your experiences, or anything else, fall in line with the Gospel, and has the character of what Scripture teaches as [the Spirit's fruit](#), God may well be at work in it, no matter how strange or contradictory it seems.

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"The truth is, of course, that the curtness of the Ten Commandments is an evidence, not of the gloom and narrowness of a religion, but, on the contrary, of its liberality and humanity. It is shorter to state the things forbidden than the things permitted: precisely because most things are permitted, and only a few things are forbidden."

---- **G.K. Chesterton**, [Illustrated London News](#), 01-03-1920

QUOTES

"Faith is the master, and reason the maid-servant."

----- **Martin Luther**

"Consider that the first time someone spoke of God in the third person and therefore no longer with God but about God was that very moment when the question resounded, 'Did God really say?' (Genesis 3:1). This fact ought to make us think."

----- **Helmut Thielicke**

"The Bible is not a book of science. The Bible is a book of Redemption."

----- **Billy Graham**

"Through this experience I found that the Bible was not adequate. I needed God in a personal way -- not as an object of my study, but as friend, guide, comforter. I needed an existential experience of the Holy One. Quite frankly, I found that the Bible was not the answer. I found the Scriptures to be helpful -- even authoritatively helpful -- as a guide. But without my feeling God, the Bible gave me little solace.

In the midst of this 'summer from hell', I began to examine what had become of my faith. I found a longing to get closer to God, but found myself unable to do so through my normal means: [exegesis](#), Scripture reading, more exegesis. I believe that I had depersonalized God so much that when I really

needed him I didn't know how to relate."

----- **Daniel Wallace**, about what happened during his son's bout with rare cancer. In *Christianity Today*, 12 Sept 1994.

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Why Study the Bible?

The purpose of learning the Bible is to live by it in the love of its divine Author. Otherwise, why bother? After a while, the Bible starts to become your lens for seeing the world as it is, and for seeing yourself. The objective is to get it so thoroughly into you that you normally think in its terms. In that way, the Spirit uses it to reshape you. And as that happens, the Bible becomes Scripture for you. It becomes a relationship with the Spirit through the Bible, a part of your relationship with the God of All.

If you were asking yourself, "why should I study the Bible?" and it leads you to want to read it, but you don't know how to go about it, that's okay. If it's even a small part of what is claimed, this is no ordinary reading experience. But it needs to be started in a simple way, to get some solid ground under your feet.

Choosing A Good Bible

The first item on your list is to get yourself a good study bible. (You can't study the Bible without a Bible!) English-language translations abound, and you can get lost in an alphabet soup of initials -- NAB, KJV, NASV, TEV, CEV, JB, and so on. For most people, the best choices would be the **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)** and the **New International Version (NIV)**, because they're easily read yet not dumbed down, and both are available in many study editions. There are still some who insist on the King James Version (KJV), the official English translation from over 500 years ago. Since I often read old forms of English, as an amateur Germanic-family linguist, it's an easy and fun read for me. Yet, most of the time, I use the NRSV, because I usually read Scripture not to enjoy languages but to have my life *transformed*. That takes the kind of thorough understanding that comes from reading in the tongue you live in, which is *not* Elizabethan, Middle, or even 19th-century English. Spirithome.com uses the NIV, as kindly provided in links from the [Bible Gateway](#).

For those who want to dig into the Bible for the first time, a good study bible is a good friend. It has maps, concordances, cross-references, word and name meanings, and basic blurbs on the cultures, religions, and powers of Biblical times. Such information helps to set the context for each era in the Testaments. You can also turn to paraphrases, which restate the writings for a (hopefully) clearer grasp of its meaning. The only one of those I can recommend is Eugene Peterson's The Message, because he's so good and so sound at it. His work will hit home to you after only a short reading, and hits home even to those who have been reading the Bible all their lives.

How To Study the Bible

The next matter at hand is how you would go about doing Bible study. I hope not like most of us

studied in high school, dreaming of who you were dating Saturday night, or of future glories, or of just lazing around. Each of us needs two basic arenas for Bible study.

The first is self-study -- spending time on your own prayerfully reading the Bible. It can be done book-by-book, or by theme, or based on a daily [lectionary](#) (a formal selection of key passages, on which sermons are based). Self-study is intimate, you and the Spirit who speaks through its pages. It's said that the Bible reads you as much as you read it; you start to see yourself through divine eyes. When I studied the Bible as a young adult, I did it the same obsessive way I studied school course subjects, by totally immersing myself weekends at a time just on one subject. I would use several study bibles, books, library time, letters, phone calls, articles, praying and meditating and endlessly thinking. What I soon learned is that to really get a handle on what the Spirit is saying, I needed to *be with people* and *get a life*. It's really hard to love people from behind a wall.

That realization leads us into the second arena: Bible study with others, face to face. Most often in church, at a house, or on campus. There is nothing else like a good study and fellowship group in teaching us about how to live the faith.

When you study the Bible, start where you are, not where you're "supposed to" be. Maybe you have a lot of doubts and questions. Maybe what keeps getting at you is something from a movie or a song, or what you already know or think you know all about the stories, or a Proverb your grandmother taught you. As you get into it, you'll find that you remember more than you think, but not nearly enough. Start where you are, and journey from there one footstep at a time. You're not doing it to pass judgement on the Bible or the people in it or the people who believe what it says. Nor are you doing it to whip yourself for understanding so little of it -- join the club. You were invited into this by the Spirit of the One who made us all, so *this is where you belong*. There's no cause for [shame](#), guilt, or [fear](#), least of all in Bible study.

Hearing Other Voices

The Bible is very well suited for private study. But it is even better suited for study with others. It wasn't made to be used primarily in solitude. It is God's Word spoken to you, but it is also God's Word for all of those who believe in God. That's why it's good to bounce your thoughts off of others, and hearing what others think, taking advantage of [Jesus's promise](#) about being where two or three (or more) are gathered. Otherwise, we'd miss too much. Our blind spots, our prejudices, even our being mere limited beings can get in the way. Studying and sharing with others is a way you can [discern](#) what the Spirit is telling you, because the Spirit is telling them too, and they (or you) might be hearing the Spirit more clearly at the moment. Then, there's also the voices of thousands of years of other believers, Jewish and Christian, who have been doing what you're doing, thinking about it, and coming up with penetrating insight and moves of sheer genius. They're not stupid; God got through to many of them. When you study the Bible with feedback from other voices, you're being open to the voice of the Spirit that speaks through them. Or, you might be the Spirit's voice for those others. You may not know which. So [share it!](#) Commit to your Bible study group : "I will be there; I will ask questions; I will share what I have; I will listen." A good supplement to that is Net-based chat study groups.

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Bible Study Methods

As Christians see it, the Bible's purpose is to **lead us to love God, and lead us into the good news of Christ and His coming Kingdom**. It is all fulfilled in Christ -- so says the Bible! This is where all [interpretation](#) starts and ends, and is the principle that leads the steps that follow. But we're at neither the start nor the end. The pillar of fire is not before us, nor can we walk up to Jesus and ask him a question. We're in a different time and place and situation, and live in a life with endless complications that were not even dreamt of ere long ago. So we are left with the task of having to figure out what the Spirit is saying to us in that Bible passage. What is the Spirit up to? What is the [creative Spirit](#) creating, shaping, or teaching through it? But we are not left alone; **God has sent the Spirit to guide us -- God wants us to know**. This much all Christians trust, and so all can start from there when reading Scripture.

This means that **the Bible is *never* studied as an objective, unbiased source**. It wasn't meant to be. It never claimed to be. Every book in it is meant *not* to be read as if they were. It serves a purpose, and is totally, lovingly, celebratively biased toward that purpose. The most important of all purposes.

Be Honest About Your Studying

When studying the Bible, it is important to remember that:

1. **you are always [interpreting](#)**. The wisdom of the Bible is never infused directly into the brain or fed into your blood system as if through an intravenous solution. We all put the Bible through a screen, and see it from a specific angle.
2. You *will* **project your own world** into the situation found in the Bible, with mixed results.
3. **You will pick and choose** - we all do! There are things we follow, and things we don't. That's good, to some extent, but a disaster in other ways. And, if we do it in a way that's honest with the text, it's also biblical, for that is what the people *in* the Bible did with earlier holy words spoken and written, for better and for worse.
4. You *will* try to hone it down to a **simplicistic, basic meaning(s)**. That will get you the benefit of having a general rule or lesson you can apply, but you will leave out the rich tapestry and detail of what Jesus meant by saying, "follow Me".
5. You *will* use **frameworks from outside of Scripture** to understand the Bible passage you're reading. Again, those who were living out the Bible before it was written did the same thing using previous Scripture. And again, the process can bring great gain or raise all sorts of nasty mayhem.

The way to take care of this is to **always be aware that this is what you are doing**. And then, **take intentional steps to counteract the biases this creates**. For example, see the passage through a different person in the story. Or, spot the extra-biblical framework as you start to use it, see where it goes, then step back and use a framework that differs based on a key word in that passage. Or, slow down to savor the Word in its details. Or, talk to someone else about it, outside of you or your group. And, most importantly, never ever think you have the final answer in finding in it what God wants to teach you. Bible passages are "multi-valent"; that is, they have different shades of meaning within

them.

A Framework For Bible Study

Christians use so many methods for interpreting the Bible that I won't even try to count them. (Even when you use no method, you're still using a method -- by which I mean that no interpretation comes out of thin air. There's [a way which led to your interpretations.](#)) I'll give you my own way; maybe as you read it, you might recognize what you do. My questions can start at any point along the way, but sooner or later must face up to all the other parts of the process.

After being honest about how you're doing it, the next principle is that **Scripture interprets Scripture** -- what the Spirit's telling us through Scripture is unlocked by, tested by, qualified by, and balanced by, the rest of Scripture. This does not force us to treat any part of it as if it were without [human failings](#) or [error](#); the only way people of today can really trust the truth of something like that is if they discover it for themselves. No part of the Bible is slighted or ignored -- but no part of it stands on its own.

The Bible is a set of **written documents**, a library about God's core works among people. That means it works by way of **literary forms** such as poetry, story, commentary, and testimony. That means it has **grammar and format**, just like this article does. It covers incidents in history, and thus it is **a part of the history of its time** as also learned from archaeology and from other writings. If you try to understand Scripture without paying attention to this truth, almost immediately your understanding will go off-track.

There's a current school of thought called 'the narrative method' which comes in here. The 'context' for everything in the Bible is its overall story line or 'meta-narrative'. All parts of the story find their meaning within the course of the overall story. The method isn't without its problems. The story is much greater than the sum of its parts, but you can't really know the story without grasping its parts, especially when the story develops from real life. Each passage, even each word, must have its full due and not be dismissed, even the most disgusting parts, even when it seems to go against the narrative. That said, the 'narrative' methods focus on what's [most important](#) about the Bible. The rest of it may be good to know, helpful, and even God's [blessing](#) for you, but it is the overall story line that gives us the 'why' for each Bible passage's being there.

Another principle is to interpret the Bible **prayerfully and devotionally**. If you're not communicating with God about it, meditating on it, and doing the things which surrender more and more of your being to God, you won't hear the Spirit even if your mind comes to good factual conclusions on the matter at hand. (This is also why it is so important to fill [worship services](#) with Bible passages and language. Its use in worship helps keep our souls open and thankful to the God of the Bible.)

Next, **study what others said, and say today**, about what a set of Bible verses mean. Pay attention to :

1. 2000 years of faithful yet sinful Christians, and 3000 years of Jews;
2. the circle of believers you have fellowship with in your day-to-day life,

- including your pastor;
- 3. the billion other Christians alive today;
- 4. non-Christians who have honestly grappled with either the Scriptural passage or the subject matter at hand. This would include the thoughts of sages, authors, and experts. Even the scriptures of other faiths, *when treated in the same non-authoritative manner as sages and authors.*

The Spirit may have led them to understandings you'd never have thought of. Or they might not have been influenced by the same political or cultural climate as you. The Spirit worked through the Bible to build and shape the faith community and the people in it. That tells us something about where the Spirit is taking us (and you) today.

Next, God gave you the ability to **think for yourself**. You can reason, figure things out, research, probe, and question. Use science, history, sociology, physics, and psychology. This is by its nature partly made from logic, and partly from a world view you already have. Use what you've learned over the years. The Spirit can work through your thinking, and change or strengthen it. When **Scripture** is training the mind, that Scripturally-shaped mind is then set free to more fully understand the Testaments.

Within someone who prepares themselves aright in the other ways above, **the Spirit can use their feelings, conscience, and intuitions to help guide them**. Gut instinct and powerful emotion are no more (or less) sinful than anything else about you. But they must be shaped and given boundaries through the other checks, or they will tyrannize you. Sometimes it seems like thoughts and feelings as opposing sources that fight against each other. But **there are ways they can work together**. For instance, allow the Spirit to use the Bible to help you (and those you study with) imagine that passage of the Bible being lived out in your world. Or, picture yourself in Scriptural events, through the people who lived those events.

Sifting Through the Bible

This process of sifting through your Bible readings can be like a conversation with God (just like prayer) or a lifelong series of text messages between you and God. Or maybe a weird kind of Q-and-A which sometimes becomes Q-and-Q, where God answers you back with a question. If you're listening for it, it can be great to share your hopes, feelings, or thoughts with God. For me, it sometimes feels like a ping-pong match, where God fires back fast with a lot of spin and twist. It can get pretty intense, and it can sting where the ball hits you. Your part of the process is to pay close attention. It might be a thought that keeps coming to mind, or something that's happening around you as you go through the day, or an opportunity that arrives, or something someone says that throws you back to an earlier Bible reading. In that way, it's an ongoing process that follows you through your daily life. It is to be learned, felt, and acted upon in the light of the wider Scriptural witness to God's redeeming purpose through Christ.

There are other things (**specialized gifts, extraordinary circumstances** and such) that aid Bible study, but they would come under these principles.

Within the above framework, humans are not exalted above Scripture, and no part of the Bible is

simply ignored or interpreted away or rendered invalid. None of these steps are strictly 'natural'; **all have a supra-natural agency, someone beyond nature -- the Spirit -- at work.** The trouble level rises as one goes down the list, but there's always the other principles to keep that in check. The wise Christian turns these into a set of habits and patterns, a work ethic that becomes a part of our normal day-to-day way of living and learning. The wise Christian community trains us in these patterns from cradle to grave, and commits itself to live by what the Spirit shows us through the biblical Scriptures. The Bible is as complex as life itself; it contains libraries worth of gray areas and galleries full of multiple facets and sparkling colors.

Live the Ways Of God

No matter how you study the Bible, no matter how much you learn from the Bible, it's all a waste of time if you don't allow what you find there to penetrate your life. If God really is God, the One with full authority over us (or in churchspeak, our 'Lord'), then what God tells us is of the highest importance to us. And that means the Bible before it means anything else. It's not there for you to just know, but for you to *believe* and *live by*. Or as John put it near the end of his Gospel:

"Jesus also did many other signs in the disciples' presence that are not written in this book. But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in believing, you may have life in his Name." (John 20:30-31).

Learning about the Bible, and even learning the Bible itself thoroughly, is not as crucial as **learning from the Bible**, and even that is secondary, since its high value comes from us *living the way of the God of the Bible*. Our task as Bible readers is to **surrender** ourselves to the Spirit who speaks through it.

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Ask Good Questions

Learning the Bible is a quest, and you pursue it by asking questions. So it's important to know how to ask *good* questions.

- Ask open ended questions, not yes/no or either/or.
- Know your own assumptions and starting-places. Know where you're *really* coming from. If your assumptions are unquestioned or hasty, God will have to apply some divine elbow grease to dislodge them first.
- Ask God follow-ups. Be a pest.
- Allow your brothers and sisters in Christ to share with you *their* questions, and then *their* insights.

Don't be afraid to take notes. And don't say, 'enough of this -- I'll just guess'; trust the process.

Is It Meant For You?

Not everything that's said in the Bible was meant for everyone at all times. For instance, not everyone

is called upon to sell all that they own and give it to the poor. Yet, that calling may well be what God wants from **you**, just as it was for Francis of Assisi and many others throughout the centuries. You're in a different situation than the young rich man Jesus commanded to do it. You have different possibilities, responsibilities, and complications, and the stumbling blocks to your faith may be very different. Remember that there was a crowd present when Jesus challenged the young man. Jesus didn't directly give those poorer people the same challenge, though there was an important challenge for them too. But just as it's wrong to presume that it applies to you, it is also wrong to be sure that it doesn't. The Spirit may well be trying to tell you something else. Use methods of discernment to [help you find out](#).

When a word doesn't directly apply to you, it still has an important message, and it's wise to come to grips with it. For instance, even if you aren't one of those who is called to give up all you have, the episode has a lesson which applies to us all: we cannot serve both God and [wealth](#). All of us have to struggle with how that works out in our lives. Just because the specific situation doesn't apply to you doesn't make it any less Scripture. God is still saying something to you, and you ought to get to know what it is.

Q.5) People often quote single verses of Scripture and insist "the Bible says." Is this a proper use of God's Holy Word?

A.) The words of Scripture speak to the Word which became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ. Scripture, therefore, must be read in the context of God's self-giving love (which is known through Jesus Christ). To read individual passages of Scripture outside the context of the Church's confession that Jesus is Lord is to misunderstand its

BRACKET THIS!

God doesn't speak objectively or dispassionately. So, why should God's Word be studied objectively or dispassionately? Only one reason is good enough: to better understand it so that our passions, our limitations, or our prejudices don't blind us to what's in Scripture. One way to think of it is this : when writing, a writer might use brackets [] or parentheses/clammers () to make an aside or take care of a side track or add a needed reference or make a corrective statement. It's good to 'bracket out' the passion of one's faith briefly, to get it out of the way of what the Spirit is really saying through the Bible passages you're studying. Brackets are useful, but only within the context of making the unbracketed whole easier to understand. While studying what's in Scripture, the bracketed 'objective' look at the passage(s) is to be done within the context of a passionate faith in the Word outside of the brackets, for the sake of making that whole life of faith better and stronger. The more objective view may well include scholarly methods or measures, logical thinking, history, and measuring up the [interpretations](#) against other evidence. All sound methods soundly pursued are worthy of use, but they are to be done in brackets set within the whole picture.

purpose.

"Authority and the Church: A Working Document", Confessing Christ, January 1998 (from the United Church of Christ tradition)

EUREKA!

(... so take a bath...)

The Spirit works hard within us to get us to grasp what God has done and is doing and will do. The moments when God's revelation hits home is sometimes described as a Hmm... or an Aha... moment. But Hmm... and Aha... happen regularly to anyone whose brain isn't switched off. Sometimes, though, it's a lot more than that. Reformed

writer **Gabriel Fackre** caught these moments better by calling it a 'eureka experience'. It's got WOW! and POW! to it. It breaks through the smog of life. If you try to use a room fan to clear out a fog bank, it fails because it's too small; you can't cut through the smog with it. But the Spirit's got a hugely powerful light that burns its way right thorough it. It's a potent gift from God.

But

Brick By Brick

When you keep plugging away at Bible study, the Spirit rewards you for it. You may not notice it, but you are being shaped and built up brick by brick as you learn God's Word. What is unfamiliar turf at first eventually becomes familiar. One lesson builds upon another, and a vision starts taking shape. The big picture comes into view. Each time you go back to a passage of Scripture or read a Bible story again, you understand it better because of all that you've discovered since last time. And you can see more of how you are to live it out in the world around you. It takes a lifetime, and even then it's not complete, because the New World you're being rebuilt for is not complete. One day, it will be. But you'll have to trust that to the Spirit who's building it.

What Is Bible Criticism?

There's also something called "biblical criticism", which is a scholarly effort to peel back the layers of work that created the Bible to find what was originally in each layer of writings, and why each layer came about. It is a type of Bible study which can be done by those who don't believe, though what they do with it would be different than that of a believer. One leading example of this is the **Documentary Hypothesis**, on how the first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) came to be. Such scholarly Bible study can often be very helpful. For one example, it teaches us that while the way the Spirit formed the Scriptures is more focused and intense, there are key ways in which it is like the way the Spirit works among us for other tasks.

Yet sometimes scholarly study can *pull you away from the reason for reading the Word in the first place*. At all times you must keep in mind that scholarly study uses good and bad scholarly theories. For many centuries it has been observed that the fewer people there are who actually *believe* the

Bible, the more scholarly studies there are *about* the Bible. **Søren Kierkegaard** (in his **Journals**, #216) suggested that we might gather up all copies of the New Testament in one place, then pray that God would take them all back, because we humans deal so poorly with it. He thought of returning it to God because the only hope for the Scriptures in his time was divine action. But it has always been so, and God has kept taking action for it, within us - thank God.

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In A Rut?

Sometimes a Bible study group can get stuck in a rut. You all start thinking alike or quickly pass by subjects that you addressed in the past or came to a hasty conclusion about. Some ideas that can help :

- Hold a joint Bible study with people of a different family in the faith. For example, Calvinists with Eastern Orthodox, Evangelicals with Catholics, Pentecostals with Lutherans, Southern Baptists with Mennonites, Free Church with Anglican or national church. Or whatever such mix you can set up. It can be for one session, one group dropping in on another, or it can be for however long it takes to go through a particular pre-chosen section. It may get vigorous when you come across differences, but that's where the lessons are. Don't just listen -- fully share what you find in it. Bible study's not meant to be a monologue. You may discover that you have a common bond in Christ.
- Take your Bible study out of the expected places. Meet at a mall, on a commuter train, at a diner, a beach, a hilltop, a park, a student lounge, or chairs put out next to a street corner. Anywhere but a safe and comfortable church or home. Look around for a while and take it in, this time with an eye for what God is doing, and for what is opposing or ignoring God. The objective is to see rather than be seen. The Spirit can speak from the world around you to teach you about the passages you're studying. You may have to struggle to hear each other, but maybe that makes you listen harder.
- Right after reading a section aloud, try setting aside five to ten minutes for silent meditation -- just focusing on the passage, thinking, listening for God's leading, praying over it. Then, share with each other from what came to you during the silent time -- thoughts, feelings, perspectives.
- Many parts of the Bible (especially the Gospels) can be acted out as a play, with dialogue and actions. Each person present takes a different role. Before trying this Bible study method, each person takes a moment to take a good look at their character, and bring their imaginations into it. You may find that you get **thoughts and feelings** you missed before, because you were a step closer to living through it. It seems more real when you see it happening around you.

There are, of course, no guarantees. But the Spirit often rewards such diligent acts of courage in the faith.

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What is meant by 'Biblical'?

biblical (also 'Bible-based', 'scriptural') : 'according to the [Scriptures](#)'. "Biblical" is an *adjective*, that is, a term that *describes* something, instead of *defining* it. The main meaning, and the strictest sense, is simply that **something is actually found in the Bible**. As to the usual intended use by today's

Christians, to be 'biblical' means that **the substance and the shape of Christian faith and life is drawn from the main course of what is taught in the Bible**. This gives each person, each teacher, each [Bible study](#), and each congregation a great responsibility. A biblical faith is a commitment. It can't be had without learning the main thrust of Scripture thoroughly, and **keeping everything in the Bible in the context of everything else in the Bible**. Being biblical also means not taking a principle from outside of Scripture and superimposing it onto Scriptural study or what comes from it. Being biblical means asking questions of the Bible and not taking it to be something it's not. It means understanding that there are many angles to what it says.

The Discipline of Bible Reading

If you are Christian, you should always be putting yourself under the discipline of the Spirit who speaks through the Bible. It plays out differently with each Christian, and differently within each Christian over time. Remember that you are making decisions about how you live and how you think -- others must make up their minds for themselves.

Having a biblical faith also means that when other sources, or your own personal tastes, give something a different style, form, or substance than that found in the Bible, you look at the scriptures more closely. Even if you decide that it's outdated or unjust, take a closer look again. See what it's *really* driving at, what core things about it come into play, and place those within the context of the Gospel of Christ. Having a biblical faith means to trust that the Bible has something to tell you. Find the underlying purposes behind it. Then, bring that to bear on the way you deal with the subject matter. [Theology](#), when done right, leads us back to the Bible, so that we can be further lit up by the Spirit. If you are Christian, you should always be putting yourself under the discipline of the Spirit who speaks through the Bible. It plays out differently with each Christian, and differently within each Christian over time. Remember that you are making decisions about how *you* live and how *you* think -- others must make up their minds for themselves. You are free to advocate, debate, teach, [affirm](#), re-shape, reject, or organize, but if you act to silence others or to be

hateful toward them, you are acting against Jesus and His gospel, and are thus being anti-biblical.

Keep in mind the discipline I just described. Because when Christians speak of a "biblical" faith, it does not mean that every word or phrase or biblical book is equally important. It means that we commit ourselves to wrestle, and *keep wrestling with*, everything in it, as long as we live. *All* readers of the Bible have a pecking order for what they read in the Bible. *All* Bible readers - even those who don't hold the Christian faith - pick and choose their key Bible passages, no matter how much we may deny it. *All* Bible readers sometimes forget that it was not written to us, but to a people of a different place and time, and that its meaning back then is a key to what it means for us today. *All* Bible readers sometimes rely on what others have said about the subject at hand, either because of their wisdom, or as a quickie shortcut. These facts are not really a problem, if you acknowledge them and make sure you continue in the discipline of reading the whole thing as it was written.

The so-called "biblical"

Often, what the Bible teaches is very different than what's usually called 'biblical'. The word's meaning has been so watered down or septonically-laden that it is used to describe anything from snake-handlers to end-time cultists and [dominionists](#) to the seminary teachers that boost the 'new morality' or modern [pantheisms](#) and neo-[gnosticisms](#). So what do you do when a "biblical" teaching is cited, especially on political matters? See if it's really there (hint: it rarely is), and, if it is, what would be *the most loving yet effective way to hold to that truth*. Talk to others about it. Certainly talk to your pastor about it, if that's who's pushing non-biblical political ideas as 'biblical'. They may get angry and vindictive, and tell you to leave; there are other congregations, many of which will welcome you.

You can also check for '**biblical**' in the [dictionary](#) .

What Is Spiritual Discernment?

Spiritual discernment is *calling on the Holy Spirit to lead or give direction on a matter*. It is how the Spirit shows the church or its people what God wants them to do and be.

There is discernment of:

- gifts,
- spirits,
- actions,
- intents,
- the course of the times we live in.

Discernment is more than just a skill. Discernment is a [gift from God](#) before it is anything else. Yet there are clearly skills you can put to use when using your gift, and you can become better at it through training and experience.

Discernment is more than just a process. Even for the most 'material' or 'nitty-gritty' matters, there is a Spirit at work nudging us, leading us, even pulling us by the nose ring. Then again, even for the most 'spiritual' matters, there are disciplines, methods, processes, means, and tools which the Spirit can work through to help us discern rightly. Discernment isn't usually a sudden zap from beyond, but something which emerges from hard work and close attention.

Learn to discern. *Yearn* to discern.

"It is impossible to frame a doctrine of the Holy Spirit by taking all the data indiscriminately and forcing them into the Procrustean bed of a formal system. We have to discriminate between what is true and what is false, ... between what is primary and what is [secondary](#), between what is central and what is peripheral;... between testimonies concerning the Spirit which reflect different levels of apprehension, between those which belong to different stages

of the divine economy, and between those which have relation to different moments in the dialectic of spirit."

George Hendry, *The Holy Spirit In Christian Theology*, p.13

Discerning the Holy Spirit

When the Spirit is on the move, it's characterized by:

- Christ-centered spirituality in every aspect of life;
- Rejection of all prejudice, class/ethnic/educational barriers, exclusiveness, and denominational warfare. When it follows the Spirit, the Body of Believers knowingly chooses to **counter-model** prejudices by living without regard to them.
- bringing attention and worship to Jesus Christ, and awareness of God's/Jesus'/Spirit's work.
- an unusual level of passion, energy, or impact.

These are the main things to look for in discerning about something:

- it is governed by love, for if it is not, it's worthless ([1 Corinthians 13:1-3](#));
- it centers us onto Jesus the Christ and Lord ([1 Cor 12:3](#)), and His good news;
- it directs us to Scripture, not away from it ([Isaiah 8:19, 20](#));
- it builds up the church and its members ([Ephesians 4:11-12](#)), giving it power, wisdom, character, boldness, and unity.
- it helps create in us a love of righteousness, a heightened sense of sin, and a turning away from known evil.

"The mystery of Pentecost is that the gift of discernment is breathed into the world, enabling us to see the presence of the divine in the midst of the human - not as an aside or an afterthought, but as the main event of our lives"

Jay Rochelle, in *Christian Century*,

'Discernment' is sometimes used as a catch-word for speaking against others (as with some 'discernment ministries'), or to defeat them in a struggle for power or influence, or just to pick at them until they quit or retreat. Discerning eyes look for whether something that's labeled 'discernment' is done from love, or whether it just is a clanging gong or a noisy cymbal. Jesus didn't call us to love ideas, he called us to love people. John put it as bluntly as he could :

**"One who does not love does not know God, for God is love."
(I John 4:8)**

When discerning, the Christian must keep in mind *why* he/she is doing it. Ask yourself, "If I raise this issue, how am I pointing people to Christ? How am I helping them grow in the Spirit? In

22 May 1985, p. 535

what way am I loving them?" If there's no answer to those questions, or if you have to stretch far and wide to come up with a complicated or weak answer, then it's best not to speak. Indeed, it's time to focus on listening, because it may be your time to learn.

for more, read this on [Christian apologetics](#).

Scripture and Discernment

Christians turn to the Bible in order to get our story right. The New Testament passes along the [testimony](#) of those who knew Jesus and His mission in person. For the early church after the [apostles](#), for the Reformers, and for us today, believers turn to Scripture because they know the Spirit speaks there. It is Scripture which shows us the Spirit's priorities, and Scripture which shares with us the vision of the coming Kingdom. The Spirit operates *through Scripture*, not against it. Through the Bible, you can discover wisdom and direction. Without it, you'll fail to distinguish **God's** Purposes and Word from *your* purposes and words. This is true of what you think and do today, and it's also true of the past, including the most treasured of traditions. If the new or the old stands against Scripture or is used to thwart its central thrusts, we must stand with Scripture, or we will fall for anything.

This 'Scripture principle' is not there to hold the Spirit in chains. It's to be used **in the light of freedom in Christ**, knowing that **Scripture does not directly address most matters**. Instead of demanding direct 'Scriptural warrant' for a practice or course of action, it's better to seek these signals:

1. that Scripture does not speak against it;
2. that the practice or teaching conveys the Gospel, and is fully in keeping with the root and heart of Christian belief found in Scripture;
3. that it turns the focus onto **Christ**, not persons, ideas, ideologies, organizations, wondrous signs, or activities;
4. that it is truthful, not rooted in a lie or distortion.

If these are all true, then no direct warrant is needed from Scripture, tradition, or for that matter, sometimes even from common sense. The Spirit has every right to lead us into new things that look like folly. The [Holy Spirit](#) is sovereign. **Discernment is about finding out** if it's the Holy Spirit and not someone else's folly.

There are some people who could stuff themselves with Scripture until it came out their noses, and they'd still refuse to let the Spirit teach them anything. They're not trying to discern at all; they're seeking support, not truth. For the rest of us, the patient, prayerful, steady study of Scripture brings many rewards. The Spirit rewards such diligent listening by developing [within us](#) an understanding of why God acted in the past. Since the same God is acting today toward the same purposes, this gives you a sense of what God is doing now and what role you may have in it.

The Scripture principle is not a substitute for the Spirit. It works only because the Spirit works through Scripture. We rely on this truth when we read the Scriptures in earnest [prayer](#). Without [the Spirit's action](#), the Bible's pages would lay still, moving your life no more than a dictionary or encyclopedia. If the Spirit is working in us, the Bible is aflame with truth and vision for every corner of our lives and for the whole world. The Spirit wants us to study, to trust, and to shape our lives according to what is in Scripture; to steep it into our souls, to live by the contours and the world vision of the Scriptures. No one can prove that the Bible is the [authentic](#) story of God's dealings with humanity. That has to be shown to each of us by the Holy Spirit.

Anyone who denies the [authority of the written Word](#) in and for the church comes real close to bypassing the Christ who *is* the living Word of God, and who *is* what the written Word is about. We cannot just nakedly 'go by the [fruit](#)' of the Spirit, because it is Scripture which tells us **what fruit** we're to look for, and **in what contexts** they are the work of the Spirit. Without the Bible, we can't accurately recognize what is from God, or tell it from what's fake.

There is another warning to be given here. You can have God-gifted leaders, go through prayerful discernment, decision-making, and accountability processes, and even have things start to go well. **But the surest way for them to turn wrong is to start telling others that their decisions are "God's will"**. That's something known years from now, if ever. It's a pretty big boast, if you think about it: you know what the Almighty knows. Most believers and non-believers alike rightly dismiss such talk. And pride does come before a fall. Decision-making isn't a matter of the thunderous "Will Of God", and even when it is, you may not have heard it right. This is a reason the Spirit builds [humility](#) into people.

Scripture shapes an authentic Spirit-led experience, and sets the bounds for it. When looking for the course and purposes of what God is doing, Scripture [ranks first](#).

[spin to the top](#)

More from this site, on discernment:

- **For those doing the Bible Study series, next is: Lesson 5 - [Studying the Bible](#)**
- [what discernment is for](#)
- [Tradition in Discernment](#).
- [The 'Strong Pastor'](#)
- [Counterfeit Gifts](#)

- [Debriefing](#).
- [Discerning Within Yourself](#)
- [Trust God](#)
- the [Gift of Discernment](#).
- [discernment in theology](#).

The Church's Role In Discernment

Discerning God's will is not just the work of an individual person. The Spirit acts within the gathered believers (the Church) so they can discern what to do and be. **Within that context**, specific persons may be gifted in leading the church as it discerns. Such gifted people are given a '[spiritual eye](#)' for cutting through facades and confusion, for getting to the heart of the matter. They listen closely, notice what's happening in the world around them, and instinctively know what place it has in God's plans. Someone who's gifted in discernment of spirits can find where evil lurks in good things, and where the Spirit is working when things are going wrong.

When the church was starting out, there was only one way she could learn the faith: on her feet. The church had to learn while she was **doing**. The Spirit had to teach the Christians how to love at the same time as moving them to **act** on that love, and teaching them [mercy](#) at the same time as empowering them to live merciful lives.

Christians sometimes forget that what we teach and discuss is inevitably **our own** understanding of Scripture. Other understandings, **if** drawn from Scripture and open to be judged by Scripture, are possible and even [faithful](#). We [discern to learn](#).

That's why it's so valuable to have the input from 2000 years of churchgoing Christians (tradition) and the billion Christians of today (fellowship). Meaning springs out of life; the Spirit's way is lived and experienced. Even more: it is lived and experienced as a part of those who believe in Jesus and his good news, a Body of Followers whose members are formed and shaped in this way, as found in Scripture. This [community](#) teaches each other, recalls history, shares their experiences, and affirms each other's value. It (sometimes) has the strength to say no and to get each of us to amend our understandings and change our ways when we're going astray, and to show a more excellent way in all things.

When you're being checked by the church, you're being checked by others who have also done patient, prayerful, steady [study of Scripture](#). The Spirit didn't give a sense of God's purposes only to you but also to others, in a slightly different way for each of them. If they *didn't* study God's ways, they *won't* have that sense, and thus are a less trustworthy part of the discernment process. (You'll never find out one way or the other unless you listen carefully, and have the guts to put away any defensive reactions you might have.)

Church actions should be set up to discern the right direction *before* it acts, to keep effective tabs on it

while it acts, and to debrief *after* it acts, making whatever disciplinary actions or clarifying lessons are needed. Do this, **expecting** that the Spirit *will* lead, if really asked and really given a chance to lead.

One drawback of the church's role in discernment is that the church is made up of people. (It's a benefit in more ways, but here's one way it's also a drawback.) People are strange, and sometimes [do wrong](#). They are not all-knowing, and have badly-damaged understandings. They can be fooled. People love to be sweet talked, to be showered with puffery and to get their egos stroked. They push aside what's bad news for the camp they're in. It's easy to become a yes-man or get stuck in the 'no' position. These facts must be kept in mind when discerning with the church. But remember too that these things are also true of you. Your role in discernment requires checking and re-checking and cross-checking, and so does the church's.

Neither you nor the communicated Word nor the Church local or universal are the bridge between the biblical events and our putting the Word into living effect. It is the *Holy Spirit's* doing.

[going up...](#)

Being Held Accountable

Like everything else in this world, our discernments are bound by our imperfections and thus can be false or shallow or merely mistaken. But it helps greatly to have the right attitude toward it :

- Make sure you can be **held accountable** by specific trusted people, on small things as well as large ones;
- Allow those others to actually *do* it. Don't fight back nor blindly accept, but pay attention and be a servant about it;
- Be ready to **hold others accountable**, if need be - even if that makes you uncomfortable.

This way, you become less bound by attitudes and actions which block your discernment.

Other Discernment Hints

One of the keys to discernment is [surrender](#). If you treat "I" as the emperor of all things, you won't be in the right place to find out what God wants of you. In fact, this selfish imperial view of existence lies at the heart of all sin: we act as if we're God, even though we certainly know better. The emperor 'I' has no clothes. So we need to set aside what we want and what we've been taught, and join with Jesus in His prayer in the face of His most ultimate decision : "Yet not as I will, but as You will." (Matt 26:39).

"I fear that many people seek to hear God solely as a device for securing their own safety, comfort and righteousness. For those who busy themselves to know the will of God, however, it is still true that "those who want to save their life will lose it." My extreme preoccupation with knowing God's will for me

Another key to discernment is a 'sense of peace' about something. That peace must take place not by itself, but within the rest of the framework of discernment, or it's not divine. Yet the absence of such peace is, by itself, mostly bad news. Such peace and security comes and grows with prayer. Peace is a gift God is more than happy to give. God wants us to have some sense of security about what we do. Since God is not a God of confusion, it will not do within God's purposes for God's followers to be confused, or be confusing.

may only indicate, contrary to what is often thought, that I am overconcerned with myself, not a Christlike interest in the well-being of others or in the glory of God."
Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, p. 28

Some hints which confirm:

- a chance encounter with just the right person;
- a thought or conviction that keeps growing;
- something from the Bible which comes to mind;
- something said in conversation which keeps coming to mind;
- an opportunity which suddenly opens up.
- it 'bites back', becoming harder to stop the more you or anyone else tries to hold it back or ignore it.

These hints mean nothing by themselves, but can mean a lot when taken together.

A decision empowers you to act. When you don't decide, you give power to someone or something else to make the decision. So if there is not a clear sense of direction from the Spirit, it could be a hint that God didn't want you or your church to decide anything. If you find this is so, then let things happen as they will, leaving it in the hands of others whom God is calling forward. It is just as likely, though, that you're just ducking the question. The best way to discern the difference is:

1. if the search for leadings from the Spirit finds nothing or almost nothing (as against having an unclear or conflicted sense of leading);
2. if there is a specific someone who is clearly stepping forward;
3. if that specific someone is doing this out of concern or love and not a drive for power.

It may take a lot of humility to admit that you are not God's chosen one and you don't hold the reins of power. But in fact, you don't; God does, and God will work through people other than yourself or your group.

Quotes

on listening, thinking, and discerning God's will

"God never gives us discernment in order that we may criticize, but that we may intercede."

----- **Oswald Chambers**

"I never learned anything while I was talking."

----- **Larry King**

"Conflating modern-day intuition, etc. with the real Spirit is like confusing a gentle breeze with a tornado. If the real Spirit were really working in the post-apostolic church, it would be just as ambiguous as a cyclone."

----- **online comment.**

"Discerning and acting on God's will does not mean you'll never have difficult days or feel lousy sometimes. But choosing to live in alignment with God makes you more joyful, compassionate, and peaceful, even on bad days."

----- **Debra K. Farrington, *Hearing with the Heart***

"The majority of historic heresy is based on an interpretation of the written not the living word. The 'living word' -- which is the Word in action through the gifts of the Spirit -- is all application and totally subjected in interpretation to the body of Christian truth, **not** an elevation of subjective over objective truth."

----- **Ron Zess** (online).

More of Jesus let me learn

More of His holy will discern;

Spirit of God, my teacher be

Showing the things of Christ to me.

----- ('More About Jesus', **EE Hewitt**, 1915)

[fifth floor: housewares, sandals, tops of pages....](#)

Ways To Discern

Prayerful Group Decision-Making

When praying in a group, let everything move out of [prayer](#) and into prayer. *Real* prayer, not prayer done because it's expected of you. The group that prays together may not always stay together, but they will as a whole be more likely to stay open to the Spirit's leadings. This will make the inevitable feuds rarer. If possible, meet with each other and other prayer partners before any meeting, and pray for the Spirit's leadings. (It's best to do that at a personal level, but it may prove necessary to officially set aside a time just for praying together.) Start meetings with some time -- about 5 minutes, more if needed -- for prayer. Then take additional time to pray together before making any key decisions. *Please don't rush, and don't feel like someone has to be speaking.* Church committees can then start to take on more of the character of prayer groups, and less of the character of a political back room.

One of the bad things about [church committees](#) (as usually run) is that they tend to become an 'in group'. This tendency can become even stronger in the prayerful approach, because of the close ties that tend to develop between members who pray together. Becoming an 'in group' defeats the purpose of the prayerful committee,

because it becomes unable to develop a true consensus for the rest of the church.

A very promising development is that some church leaders are starting to use the new online formats, such as blogging, Facebook, Twitter, and Wiki as tools to create more communication. So far, it's proven very useful. Yes, sometimes the system works to spread gossip (these *are* forms of social networking, after all). But if designed and strategized right, these tools can get you in touch with people who wouldn't (or couldn't) be at meetings, or who are afraid to speak in person. These online tools can remove the hurdles, and remove the gatekeepers so there's no censoring the feedback. The immediate speed of Net communication is also a big help in discernment.

The Feedback Loop

"There are, then, two ways to confront or criticize another human being : with instinctive and spontaneous certainty that one is right, or with a belief that one is probably right arrived at through scrupulous self-doubting and self-examination. The first is the way of arrogance; it is the most common way of parents, spouses, teachers, and people generally in their day-to-day affairs; it is usually unsuccessful, producing more resentment than growth, and other effects that were not intended. The second is the way of humility; it is not common, requiring as it does a genuine extension of oneself; it is more likely to be successful, and it is

For all the talk about charismatics' accent on actual conversion and **infilling** experiences, most of their time is taken up with a dialogue of sorts. It's a discovery session, an education with a strong feedback loop. The dialogue is about learning how to live in the Spirit and grow in the faith. And, while there are definitely teachers, there is often the sense that, whether through the front door, back door, side doors, floor, walls or roof, the 'students' are teaching each other just as much, and the teachers are usually just picking up on it. This creates a refreshing sense of equality, even if there's an authoritarian in the mix, for that loop is what the leader is reacting to and trying to control. Critics of pentecostalism quickly point out the flip side: it's a movement of those who have no theological training, so sometimes what swirls around in it is poorly thought-out. That's not just because their leaders reject theological education (some do, some don't). It's because they're a part of a feedback loop in which the Spirit that speaks through the ex-prostitute or the housewife or the blue-collar **worker** is **understood to be the same Spirit that speaks through the great preachers, teachers, and leaders**. Or as the Dan Smith song goes, "I ain't never been to Seminary, but I've been to Calvary". It comes out in unpolished ways with lots of loose ends, but it comes out so that we can pay attention to it. The attitude is that when the Spirit talks, we are to listen. Yes, use all the discernment tools the Spirit has given us, but first listen well. It's a good lesson for the rest of us to learn.

[go to the head of the class...](#)

Debriefing

**never, in my
experience,
destructive."**
--- **M. Scott Peck,**
***The Road Less
Traveled***
**(Touchstone, 1978),
p.152**

It's a good idea to set up your church events so that there's a way of getting timely feedback about the event and what was said or done during it. If something was out of the flow of the spirit, if subtle manipulations were setting in, if the leaders were drawing too much attention to themselves, if [misbeliefs](#) were floating around in the ether, it is highly important to find out about it and deal with it.

One problem is that circles are small. Those who communicate such concerns may well suffer due to formal and informal [punishments](#) and unspoken disownings. How does the parish or the event committee prevent that?? That's something you might have to work out before trying a debriefing. But then, if so, maybe you have more important problems to discuss than the event.

For a debriefing :

1. any event attendee can be part of it; it must be open.
2. set it up to eliminate pressures against speaking ill of something that happened or was said.
3. it covers good and bad, 'iffy' and 'we'll see'.

When doing it, ask questions like these:

- what was the Spirit doing?
- How did the gifts of the Spirit show themselves?
- was there anything going on that seemed like it was 'from another spirit'?
- did anyone try to use tricks? Which tricks?
- did it draw from Scripture? How much? How honestly?
- how was Jesus truthfully exalted by it?
- were there hidden agendas?
- what did we ourselves see/experience?
- how were each of us being led (if we were)?
- were we letting our [pride](#) into it?
- was anyone being left out or pushed to the margins?
- did the event reach those it was intended for (for instance, if the purpose was mainly evangelistic, how many non-believers or doubters came?)
- what were we thinking about afterward?
- did we talk to others (friends, spouse, children, etc.) about it afterwards?

If so, what did we talk about?

From the responses to such questions, seek perspective and contexts for what happened. Make no immediate decisions, but let the feedback stew for a short while.

If something was out of the flow of the spirit, if subtle manipulations were setting in, if the leaders were drawing too much attention to themselves, if [misbeliefs](#) were floating around in the ether, it is highly important to find out about it and deal with it.

Debriefing does not prevent errors before they happen. It helps stop us from doing them again. It can cause things to be done better next time, and it can help spot heresies before they take hold and warp the church. But this must be made clear: debriefing works best when it is part of an on-going process of learning, in an atmosphere where there are no penalties for taking an honest and vigorous part in that process. It works best when it becomes a part of the normal way of knowing what you're doing.

That said, each actual debriefing meeting needs an actual hub or event or happening. It works best when people know what they are there to discuss. Broader issues, future plans, and ministry evaluation are much harder to reduce to a pattern of questions. They're evaluated by way of questions that can't be answered without going back and checking.

Questions like, "*Are people really better off because of this ministry/program?*", or "*Is this the most effective way to use the church's money?*". Those questions are *not* for debriefings, but for ongoing discussion and discernment.

Church Traditions

Many church [traditions](#) have documents which state how they believe the Spirit works to help us discern. For instance, in my own Lutheran tradition, the Book of Concord (references are to the Tappert edition) says :

- **The Spirit is given through the Word** (39.3; 125.135; 313.11; 470.4; 471.13; 472.19; 520.4; 530.48; 535.72),
- **through proclamation of the gospel and sacrament** (31.2; 82.9),
- **through Word and sacrament** (262.70; 469.1; 534.65; 541.16),
- **through [Baptism](#)** (105.35; 441.41).
- **Where the Word is, the Spirit is at work** (187.44; 312.3; 415.38; 418.58; 470.4; 520.5; 528.37-38; 531.55-57; 621.29; 629.77).
- **The Spirit does its work on earth through the church** (168; 415.37; 419.61).

The [Book of Common Prayer](#) 1979 (US Episcopal/Anglican) also addresses how to know when the Spirit is at work (Catechism, pp. 852-3):

Q. How do we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

A. We recognize the [presence of the Holy Spirit](#) when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are brought into love and [harmony with God](#), with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation.

Q. How do we recognize the truths taught by the Holy Spirit?

A. We recognize truths to be taught by the Holy Spirit when they are in accord with the Scriptures."

THE STRONG PASTOR

Most Evangelical, Baptist, and historic Black churches lean heavily on the pastor's authority to do the discerning. Their pastors have almost the entire responsibility for leading the parish, and thus are responsible for seeing to it that the congregation stays on course with God. Churches of these traditions rarely suffer from a collapse into chaos. However, they may face an even more wicked situation. What happens when the one whose task it is to use discernment is the one who most needs to be held accountable? The result can be an authoritarian minister who wields enslaving [power](#) over parishioners' lives. Something less sinister happens more often: the parish and its pastor are so busy using power that they lose sight of Christ. Either way, it is bad news. The good news comes from the few congregations and humble ministers who have the guts to identify warps in teaching or practice as they show themselves, and then **deal with them by working together to change course**, as led by the Spirit. It can be done. It is far too rare.

"When a successful figure becomes especially prominent and conspicuous, the majority give way to the idolization of success. They become blind to right and wrong, truth and untruth, fair play and foul play."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer,
[Ethics](#)

Discerning Within Yourself

As you grow in your dealings with [the Holy Spirit](#) in prayer and disciplines, you'll come to see more clearly how the Spirit at work in day-to-day life. Since the reborn New You has a [supernatural](#) nature, the supernatural begins to feel quite natural. As we allow ourselves to live in tune with God's gifts, it becomes easier to see where the supernatural is making things happen in our natural lives. In doing that, our faith deepens. The more we (appropriately) use the gifts we're given, the better we get at what we use the gifts for. The Spirit not only gives, the Spirit also **teaches** and **trains**. A skill develops to go with the gift.

The spiritualists of Luther's day, like Muntzer and Karlstadt, drew hard lines between good and evil, and They treated [salvation](#) as if it were a process of making ourselves ever more like God. That is [synergism](#), a form of 'works righteousness' that conveys what a person *senses* is happening, but does not convey what is **actually** happening. They also relied strongly on [the inner voice](#) and on experiences on precisely the **kind of matters** where those guides have no actual role.

Luther knew that there is only one Lord, and he rules over all of life. The Spirit doesn't give a dispassionate 'power' so we can fully imitate Christ. The Spirit works to give us **Christ Himself**, so that, as Paul put it, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). It is the work of God. and our task is one of response.

Conscience can sometimes be a useful guide, at least according to Paul. But then, maybe we listen more to Jiminy Cricket and trust our conscience too much and too often. **A conscience needs to be formed and shaped**, otherwise it just oozes around like a glob of goo, confused or going in conflicting directions. Or maybe, not going anywhere at all. (It would still be of much use, but not any part of what it can be.) The modern world inflicts great damage on the conscience, so it gets twisted up and can't do its job rightly, or worse, can't do it at all.

The Spirit uses earthly tools (Christian education, [Scripture](#), learning while doing, and so on) to reshape us and our conscience. This re-formed conscience gets set into a context of prayer, fellowship and the spiritual disciplines. It is only this re-formed conscience that becomes a (fairly) trustworthy guide. This re-shaped conscience senses when we are or aren't living in harmony with the truths that God has written into our new selves, and it aims us upward.

Uncovering Bogus Gifts and Deeds

The letter to Timothy warns that [some will be led to follow deceiving spirits](#). Those spirits can be from beyond the Christian faith, such as the seeking of [wealth](#) or fame or magical power. But most of it will be where it can do the most damage : within the Christian community.

There are some markers by which we can tell the spiritual counterfeits:

- the lack of love they show. (It's no accident that Paul puts into the middle of his powerful writings on gifts (1 Corinthians 12 and 14) his earth-shaking chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13).)
- one person's authority is held beyond question;
- someone or something is in the place that Christ and His good news should be.

No one, on their own authority, can 'send' the Spirit into others, and certainly not:

- chucking into them like a spear

- shooting into them like an arrow
- doing a countdown (like that of a rocket launch) to the arrival of the Spirit

(No kidding -- such stuff is really being done in some circles.)

Doing such things is like a satire on God's gift-giving, a joke at God's expense. The Spirit follows no human's cue as to where or when to act. **The Holy Spirit acts to draw attention to Christ, not to lift up an evangelist or preacher or ministry or movement.**

Who makes counterfeit gifts? Mostly the human mind of the faker, through learning how to trick people or to draw them into [dependent relationships](#). Sometimes there is power which comes from the Chief Deceiver himself. Whatever the source, there's a lot of it going around. Where the frauds show up, they must be called for what they are.

When the pastor and lay leaders *teach, preach, and model good discernment, it creates a good atmosphere for it.*

Scripture provides us with some rules on discernment of [spiritual gifts](#). Paul's rules on gifts is that they are there to be used to build up the gathered believers and further the Gospel witness, in any specific situation. He also says they are to be used with a sense of good order.

When the pastor and leaders teach, preach, and model good discernment, it creates a good atmosphere for it. The members wouldn't look at someone who raises hard questions as if they're weird. Fewer folks would say "that's not how we do things around here". Their leaders could show them that if they are to follow Christ, then seeking the Spirit's leading **is** the way things are done in the Church.

The [spiritual fruit](#) are to be found not in the moment of a miracle, but in life **after** the miracle.
[Rise up O saints of God](#)

Trust God

"The basic decision, after all, is to let God be God, to say "[yes](#)" to the work of the Lord, which goes before the church's ability to understand or even perceive it."

Luke Timothy Johnson, *[Scripture and Discernment](#)*

The fact that I can write a long piece on discernment and just scratch the surface tells us how foggy our human vision is. We can use all the means of discernment at hand, act on what it leads us to

believe is direction from the Spirit, and still do a belly-flop and look like a jerk. We all need to keep in mind that it's okay to be mistaken. Our God is a God of grace. The Church's role is to be there with a hand to help you back up and to get you moving in a steadier way. If the church doesn't do it, God *will*, somehow. God rewards [spiritual](#) diligence.

It may take a while to see through the fog of life. That's why we need to keep discerning. Keep at it, and the Lord's light will burn away most of the fog.

Burden Of the Lord

A reader writes:

You are saying that a word from the Lord which almost always carries a burden with it can possibly be considered a prophecy.

When I speak of a '**burden**', I am speaking less about how to know what is vaguely prophecy (which God can give to many), but rather how to know who is living the role of a prophet (someone whose overwhelming gift and primary calling for their life is to deliver prophecy to those for whom it is meant). We use the term 'prophet' far too loosely nowadays. You don't have to have a specific burden to speak prophecy. But one of the key features of a prophet is that they have the burden of the Lord upon them -- whatever burden the Lord puts onto them. It is a burden about God's people and those in authority around them, before it is anything else. And it is a burden for them, too; they feel it in their gut, it wracks their soul, preoccupies their mind -- God gives them a taste of what His love is like to Him as He sees us live as we do.

For instance, what if you feel like someone who will be traveling is in danger and God impresses this upon your mind?

That's a 'word of knowledge' of some kind. I usually separate that gift out from 'prophecy'-as-such, a la Paul. Even so, you mention something that's been reported many times. In fact, when there's a big plane crash or other traveling disaster, there's often reports of someone who was warned off the flight by someone else.

But, these type of circumstances can not be found about individuals whose names aren't even in the Bible.

Of course they can! The Bible is the foundation of everything a Christian does. But you are a continuation of the Bible's story, and so are the 1 billion believers around you. (Not that you are Scripture, but if Acts was being written today, you could well be found in it.) The message, the miracles, the [changed lives](#), the conflicts, the role models, the problems, the gifts --- they're all different today, yet at their core still the same as then. The gospel train is still running. This is an awesome responsibility that we can't take lightly. But then again, it's nothing to dread, for Christ sent the Spirit in His stead.

more on [prophecy](#)

What Is Exegesis?

Exegesis [< Greek *exègeisthai* (to interpret) < *ex-* (out) + *hègeisthai* (to lead). Related to English 'seek'.] To interpret a text by way of a *thorough analysis of its content*. When you do exegesis, you are an *exegete* who is *exegeting* the text. What you are doing is described as being *exegetical*. In its most basic Bible-relevant meaning, exegesis means **finding out what the Spirit originally was saying through its author in that Bible passage.**

Exegesis is what comes out of the Bible, as against what gets read into it. (Of course, the ways we use to find out from the Bible are often merely ways to put something into it 'between the lines'. That's really eisegesis in a Halloween costume.) In a more [theological](#) setting, exegesis means what comes from the use of certain methods of studying the Bible. Just about every imaginable method already has a name, and there are all sorts of mixes, but the main types are :

- **historical** (using the historical context to find what it meant back when it was written or when it happened),
- **canonical** (treating the Bible as a whole document designed to be what a specific community shapes its life by),
- **symbolic/allegorical** (figuring out what each story, character, and event represents),
- **literary** (using the literary forms, word choices, editing work, main themes or narratives, etc., to understand what was written),
- **rational** (thinking it through using logic and deductive techniques).

Nearly all Bible students use most of the methods in their own way at some time, even if they don't know that they do. All of them are often helpful, sometimes not at all helpful, and occasionally downright deceptive. It's best to see all methods as tools for the Bible student to use prayerfully, rather than as rules to follow or conclusions ('scholarly consensus') that one must accept. There are many angles and facets to most passages of Scripture, and the different ways to exegete the text can help you get at more of them. What other passages of Scripture say is not the only relevant thing. What is true about the world around any setion of Scripture also affects what is meant by that section of Scripture. (Just for examples: the behavior of Babylon and the characteristics of the rule of Nebuchadrezzar are relevant to the fall and exile of the Kingdom of Judah. And, everything that

happens in the Gospels must be held in the context of the Roman Empire's rule over the region.)

If you aren't doing some kind of exegesis, you are not finding out what the writings themselves are saying. But what good is knowing eternal truth if it doesn't matter to the way you live? Thus, exegesis is just one important step in studying the Bible; there also needs to be hermeneutics (see below).

You can also look up how to **define** [exegesis](#) in the dictionary.

"Exegesis...is an act of love. It means loving the one who speaks the words enough to want to get the words right. It is respecting the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully."

-- **Eugene Peterson**, in **Theology Today**, April 1999, p.10

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What Is Eisegesis?

Eisegesis [< Greek *eis-* (into) + *hègeisthai* (to lead). (See 'exegesis'.)] A process where one leads into study by reading a text on the basis of pre-conceived ideas of its meanings. It is rare for someone to be called an 'eisegete', because eisegesis has a well-earned negative reputation.

Eisegesis is what's being done **when someone interprets the Bible according to notions that were born outside of the Bible**. In eisegesis, *we read stuff into Scripture*. For instance, the idea of the United States as a "Christian Nation" is the creation of egos who gloat over [being powerful](#). It has no basis in history or fact, but more important, it has no basis in the Bible. Thus it arises from eisegesis. Yet some leading US politicians and pastors interpret the Bible through this notion.

To some extent, *eisegesis is unavoidable*. We don't come to the Bible with a blank slate. A lot of living and learning went into each of us. If we really bring our whole selves to the study of the Bible, all that stuff in us **will** and *should* have an [impact](#) on how we learn from the Bible. Here's where prayerful obedience and discipline come in, for the Spirit rewards hard work and harder [prayer](#). The hard work uncovers what the Bible is telling us, and the obedience sets aside the ideas we cherish so that we may take on the Bible's vision. The same living and learning that would have made us do an eisegesis of the text, instead becomes the raw material for re-visioning our lives and thoughts (through hermeneutics) in the light of what the Spirit reveals in Scripture (exegesis).

You can also come up with ways to **define** [eisegesis](#) in the dictionary.

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What Is Hermeneutics?

hermeneutics [< Greek *hermeneu(te)s* (interpreter).] The science of interpretation of a story or text, or the methods used in that science.

For Bible study, hermeneutics is about **the ways you discover meaning in the Bible for your life and your era**, faithfully taking its intents into today's world. The Bible is not meant to be a lazy read. When you read it, you use ways to figure out what it means and how to live out what you've learned. There's a science and art to that: hermeneutics. (There's a page on this site that has [more on doing this](#).) You use a hermeneutic, even if you think you don't. Hermeneutics are a type of [discernment process](#), ways of mining for God and God's truth. Like other forms of [discernment](#), hermeneutics is a task that's best not done alone, but with a Spirit-led community that lives and breathes this Biblical Word. Such a community lives a hermeneutic of the Bible, and the testimony of each person in it is a living [viability apologetic](#) for the God of that Bible. However, interpretation is not something you can just slough off to the Spirit-led community and leave it there. It is also *your* responsibility, *your* task, to shape your faith through the Word, and to help the community shape its own faith through the Word. It is a *hermeneutical responsibility* to be taken with the utmost of diligence.

Just as no exegesis is fully free of eisegesis, no hermeneutic is fully free of the thought frameworks, cultural presumptions, and hidden intents that already exist within us. That's bad news when it blocks the Spirit (for example, when we use it in order to find ways to harm or demean others). But the Spirit can change your hermeneutic in mid-course. The Spirit is fully able to speak through Scripture to make us aware of our frameworks, assumptions, and intents, and maybe cause us to be puzzled or revulsed by them. Once that happens, the Spirit can then change them, and maybe even use you to change them in your faith community and in other people.

Hermeneutic Distance

There's a lot of talk nowadays about "**hermeneutic distance**". It means that you are not actually in the life and times of Scriptural happenings and people, and even if you were, you may not have been in the role you think you'd have been. As times change, so does the setting for what God is trying to say to you through the Bible. Our era is not the same as Jesus', or even your father's. It's a hot topic now because so much is changing so fast. Churches make far too little of change, as if [unchangingness](#) is what counts, when in fact [change](#) also counts, because no learning or growth happens without change. Non-believers and 'liberal-church' believers make far too much of it, since in fact the more things change the more they stay the same, as most of the core matters of life change more in shape than in substance. Each era develops its own set of likenesses to the era of Jesus.

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You can also find ways to **define** [hermeneutics](#) in the dictionary.

Is the Bible Infallible?

Infallible [Latin *in-* (not) + *fallibilis* < *fallere* (to deceive)]. When defined in its best sense, 'infallible' means that **when the Bible is speaking the Good News of Christ and describing the character, vision and purpose of God, [through the Holy Spirit's work](#) it *transcends* the sin, spiritual and natural limitations of its writers**, and of the means of communication and transmission (such as print or translation or [preaching](#)), and of the readers/hearers. ('Transcend' means that the Bible' message is so

much bigger, broader, and stronger that it bursts right through its material-world character.) *The Bible is not fooled, nor is it fooling you.*

According to the idea of infallibility *in its best sense*, the Bible *does not fail in its objective to put the [Gospel message](#) of God's love and [forgiveness](#) before you*. The Bible becomes the way we find out that the fallen human race is being made whole and worthwhile through Christ.

Christians Differ On Infallibility

- **Fundamentalists** overplay the term, saying that the 'infallible word of God' is infallible on every matter it covers, in just about all its uses. [Fundamentalists](#) hold that whatever is from God is '[fully holy](#)' (= totally separate), and thus can't possibly have any of the tarnish that humanness puts on all it touches. Thus, in effect:
 - Point 1: The Bible gets just about *everything* right;
 - Point 2: If it doesn't, then go back to Point 1.
 They use 'infallible' and 'inerrant' in tandem, as a team, to defend the idea that the Bible is always correct. Those on Fundamentalism's edges sometimes pit 'infallible' vs. 'inerrant', favoring less the one they see as more constrictive.
- **Mainline Protestants** choose not to use the term 'infallible'. They would rather start reading their Bible by thinking it through and learning to trust the Bible than by starting with a conclusion and working backward. They see that the most common use of the term is for sowing turmoil and [separation](#) within the Church. The word 'infallible' is now a tool of polemics (fighting words) rather than as a way to help us think about the broader framework of the Bible and its message. It is being used as a tool for expelling Christians who don't hold the fundamentalist view. Mouths open, ears shut, and tempers flare. Jesus and the apostles called on His followers to use all words in a way that honors God and unites His people in love.
- Some mainline 'progressive' Protestants (especially among US Presbyterians and the United Church of Christ) believe there is *nothing* in the Bible which escapes the weak earthly wisdom, motives and intents of the [human authors](#), so even each part of its Gospel message (such as the New Testament's answer on the cosmic role of Jesus of Nazareth) must pass the bar of human reason. This sounds fine to those who think open-mindedness and reasoning are all that matter. Yet the Scriptural message rather clearly says that some matters are simply too [important](#) and too true for followers of Christ to waffle about. The Spirit [inspired](#) the biblical writers so they would get these matters right no matter what other ideas or motives were floating through their minds. There's a lot *they* didn't know, *but there's a lot we still don't know*, and what we do know (or *think* we know) we don't fully or rightly understand. Our task is to leave ourselves open to the Spirit speaking through the Bible.
- **Evangelicals, Pentecostals**, and many Lutherans, Methodists, and Anglicans are not willing to call the Good News flawed or failed, but recognize that there are things happening in the Bible that its authors didn't understand. **Roman Catholics** can speak of the 'infallibility' of the Bible, but only within the framework of the historic Roman Church tradition and the God-guarded teaching role of the Roman Church leadership ('Magisterium'). The **Eastern Orthodox** don't think in any of these terms, seeing the Bible and churchly tradition as one flowing stream in which the Gospel message remains [truthfully conveyed](#) through the work of the Spirit. **Postmodernist** Christians see infallibility the same way they do inerrancy, as a relic of modernist/Enlightenment thinking (see below).

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More:

You can also find a definition for '[infallible](#)' in the dictionary. But as you can see, there are so many shades to these words that a dictionary can't hope to keep up with them.

Is the Bible Inerrant?

Inerrant [Latin *in-* (not) + *errāre* (to wander, stray) < prob. Indo-European root *ers-* (to move around, be in motion). The term 'inerrant' first came into English in the 17th century to describe the fixed ('non-wandering') position of the stars.] As defined in its best sense that's closest to mainstream Christian tradition, it means that **the Scriptures are always right (do not err) in fulfilling their purpose: revealing God, God's vision, God's purposes, and God's good news to us.** The teachings of Scripture are not to be disregarded or tossed away as if they were a mistake. They must be dealt with straightforwardly, in a way which affects what we say and do as persons and as a body of believers.

Some Christians ('**fundamentalists**' or '**literalists**') teach that the Bible is without error or fault in every way on all sorts of matters: chronology, history, biology, sociology, psychology, politics, physics, math, art, and so on. Every word of it is a word from God. There can't be any mistakes in a divine work, fundamentalists say, for God is perfect and [cannot lie](#). The ideas behind an inerrant Bible existed long ago, but the word 'inerrant' itself wasn't used in a specific way about the Bible until the late 19th century. At that time, a complex ideological defense of literalism, inerrancy, and infallibility began through [B.B. Warfield and A.A. Hodge](#), and grew over the years through the works of **J. Gresham Machen**. In the 1960s and '70s, biblical inerrancy became normative for the main part of evangelicalism, due largely to the writings of **Harold Lindell**, an editor at Christianity Today, and his *Battle For the Bible*. This approach is summed up in the [Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#). Yet many evangelical writers and thinkers, especially outside of the US, continue not to hold to inerrancy.

Though the literally-taken Bible is sometimes more right than many people think it is, it is quite far from being an inerrant [authority](#) on the wide spread of matters mentioned above. It wasn't written to be; that's not why it's there. It's a divine work, but it *never* claims to be inerrantly dictated from on high, like some other holy works. The books of the Bible were written by divinely-inspired [human beings](#), for the good of other human beings. The Bible itself shows how the **inerrant Holy Spirit** works through *errant people*, for that's the only kind of people there are. (Remember, that means **you**, **and your favorite teachers**.) In a way, the Bible is God's communication *incarnated* into the stuff of [material earth](#) -- pages and ink, literary forms, languages, human minds, and spoken words. This combination gives us a Bible that can be mistaken on matters which are not directly tied into what the Bible exists for. It must be [learned](#) and interpreted, not assumed. Because of this literalist misunderstanding of the Bible, **mainline Protestants** (such as the Methodists, ABC Baptists, United Church, Anglicans, most Presbyterians, and most Lutherans) choose to reject the term 'inerrant'. This helps to set the record straight. How true are we being when we make exaggerated claims for our most precious written resource?

Some **Evangelicals** show a better understanding of the term in the [Lausanne Covenant](#), which holds the Bible to be "**without error in all that it affirms**" (Sect. 2, The Authority And Power Of the Bible). That is meant to put the focus on the Bible *as an instrument of God for a particular task* ('what it affirms'). This is much like the approach of African churches and the 'new breed' [Pentecostalist](#) churches. It's also much like the Lutherans in the Missouri Synod, the European Inner Missions, and (in practice) most of the 'church growth'-oriented community churches. However, those churches have long felt fundamentalism pulling them toward a more rigid kind of inerrancy. The term 'inerrant' is foreign to **Eastern Orthodox traditions**, even though the concepts and attitudes behind it can be found in some of its parts. The Roman Catholic Church, in the Second Vatican Council document [Dei verbum](#) ('*God's word*', 1965-11-18), used the term "without error", but in a different sense than the Fundamentalist evangelicals. Essentially, the Bible's inerrancy concerned the truth which God wanted to convey "for the sake of our salvation", and "must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written".

Current-Day Challenges

For **postmodernist Christians**, the whole concept of an inerrant Bible is 'foundationalist' (that is, that the Bible stands on something rational or demonstrable, namely, its having no faults). Postmodernists reject foundationalism, by holding that any philosophy, set of ideas, the Bible, or even life itself, can only have meaning as a part of the web or relational network of all life, truths, and facts. And their 'web of truth' is different than the rigid 'modernist' structure of truth which inerrantists speak of. Scripture is not seen as standing up by itself. It is held together in a net with not just God, but also with humanity and with the world of which we are a part. This critique can at times be helpful in arguments about infallibility that generate much more heat than light.

Progressive Christians see evidence that the Bible itself 'evolved', in several ways. One is that it was gathered from materials which, for the most part, had to prove their way into their place with the other such books over time. Also, there is movement in the Bible from earlier understandings (such as animal sacrifice and wars seen as divinely commanded) to fresh understandings through new revelation (Jesus and his way of peace). A 'progressive' Christian would think of those changes as part of the normal process of 'evolving'. **Moderate and conservative Protestants** see that there is a direction in this. That would make it much more accurate to use the New Testament's language and treat these changes as **fulfillment** or **completion** of what God intended all along. An inerrantist has trouble understanding the whole idea of change within the Bible and ever since, because they set up such a rigid, unchanging system about what it says to us today.

Where Points of View Fail

Some writers claim that, like nearly all philosophical differences, truth claims (such as those built on inerrancy and a literal Bible) simply 'dissolve away' by looking from a different angle, so that they don't really matter or mean anything. They say, "change your point of view, and see how what you have always held to be true just goes away". There is a partial truth in this. **The new angle reveals some things, however it also hides others.**

Look at the inside face of your hand. You see the fingerprints, the palm, the lines formed over time by the gripping action of your hand. Now turn it slowly. Eventually, you see the side of your hand, and

no longer see the palm or any fingers but the thumb and pointer. Turn it more, and you see the back of the hand and the knuckles, the small folds, the hairs, the other fingers, but still not the palm. Each angle misses something and reveals something, but that does not mean what's seen on the other side 'dissolves away' or becomes irrelevant. The palm or the knuckles are still there and are still important, even when it's unseen.

Many inerrantists (and some others) speak as if the Bible shares a 'different kind of truth' that is beyond logic or proof or testing. But at what point does the claim to a 'different kind of truth' become like the dark side of the moon, or like the other side of the hand, which leaves too much undiscovered? When does it become a mask to hide behind, a way to duck the questions? Even worse, if it doesn't matter that there's anything factual behind the Bible, why would a non-believer bother taking up with the poor deluded people who actually believe that a real God really *is* forgiving us and *is* giving us life beyond death in God's new world? The postmodern non-believer would create their own matrixed philosophy of love instead, which would be unlike the meaty, bloody, dirty, un-nice, demanding, tough stuff of the Bible. Or, they would treat the Bible like *Lord of the Rings* or *Dianetics* or even *Green Eggs and Ham*. The Bible is much more than that - not totally different from other books and not fully outside of reasoning, but nonetheless it is *different in kind* and purpose. Our points of view don't allow us to understand enough to make up a worthy substitute.

The Bottom Line

While it's impossible to draw a clear line as to when '[interpretation](#)' becomes dishonest with its source, *at some point it does*. We [interpret away the Bible](#) at our own risk. Truth matters, and in different ways so do fact, logic, and rational processes. Taking rigid stances through concepts like inerrancy are intended to make a solid ground on which to stand. It fails, because the fudge factor is built-in every time any humans interpret anything. Yet it also fails if we say that the Bible should be followed 'because the Church's tradition and leaders says so', or because 'I feel it in my heart' or 'I can just tell what's up'. Every one of these is quite often wrong, occasionally in a very serious way. Whittling it all down to a few core basics may be a way to start, but we don't grow unless we move onward to much more complex questions of how to live it and how the world really is. None of these reasons make the Bible true or right, and certainly not inerrant. Ultimately, the Bible's authority comes from the Spirit of the God who keeps choosing to work through Scripture in a [unique and special way](#). The Spirit turns the hand to the other side, but still reminds you about what you don't see. All our words about the Bible, especially 'inerrant', do little more than try to describe some small part of how that can be. **Because 'inerrant' is a word that misses so many important points, and because its use is almost always for polemics (fighting words), it's best to use other terms in its stead.**

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More:

You'll also find a definition for '[inerrant](#)' in the dictionary. But the dictionary itself is not inerrant. Also, **Derek Ouellette** takes a look at what this term, combined with '[perspicuity](#)', when pushed to an extreme, [leads to](#).

And, **Ian Paul** looks at 'infallible' and 'inerrant' from an [English Evangelical perspective](#), stimulated by Brian McLaren.

What's Inherent In the Bible?

inherent [Latin *inhaerere*, to be attached or be an inseparable part of, < *in-* (in) + *haerere* (to stick to)]. That which is part of the essential character of something; part of its nature or habit, something that is so much at its core that it can't be separated or removed from it.

This word was popularized among mainline Protestants through its use by Walter Brueggemann and Martin Marty. Unfortunately, it was quickly put to use by mainline seminarians and theological liberals to simply blow off important Evangelical challenges to the mainline attitudes toward the Bible. ('**Inherent**' sounds like the polemical Evangelical term '[inerrant](#)'). That was not the main intent of Brueggemann or Marty; they were trying to find a more truthful and helpful word to describe *how the Spirit communicates* through Scripture. For the Bible tells the story of God's [covenant relationship](#) with a people, the Hebrews. From there, it became the story of how the Lord of Life lived among us as a human, to die as a human, to be alive again as a human. By telling us of the story of the life of Christ and God's dealings with humanity, the Bible *can't help but communicate* what God wants of us, what God is up to, and how to find out what is of God. God's Word is thus **inherent** in it - it comes with the story, as the heart of the story.

What's Intrinsic To the Bible?

Another word with a definition like 'inherent' is "**intrinsic**" [Latin *intrinsecus*, inwardly; akin to Latin *intra* within], meaning "belonging to the essential nature of". God's call to all of us is *intrinsic* to the Bible's telling us about God's relationship with ancient Israel and the earliest Christians. If one is told, you get the other with it.

How is the Bible Indelible?

Indelible [Latin *in-* (not) + *dēlēbilis* (able to be defaced or covered over) < *dēlēre* (to delete, wipe out, take away)] : When you get into the habit or practice of reading the Bible regularly, its lessons seep through despite attempts to white it out or paint it over. It **leaves its mark on us**, somehow, in some way. *It does not come back empty*. The Spirit keeps calling to us through the Bible, telling us of God's love and grace. God's word *will* be heard, and it *will* have an impact.

You can also find the dictionary definition of '[indelible](#)'.

What Is A Literal Interpretation of the Bible?

literal : One of the most misused words about the Bible. The word 'literal' is defined as '**what the words say**', or '**letter by letter**'. Yet the same exact word with the same exact spelling says different things in different settings around different other words, using different literary forms. (For instance, '**love**' means one thing in [Jesus' command to love](#), and a very different thing in a steamy sex poem, and still another when a child talks about a pet puppy.) A **literalist** believes that every word of the Bible is not just a part of the divine [creative Message](#) (Greek *logos*), but is also a specific word from

God, which has one meaning. Yet the human writers of the Bible were inspired by the Spirit to tell stories and histories, write poems and songs, tell epic adventures and epic failures, and share visions with their readers/hearers. It is *literature*. And that is the context in which you discover the true **'literal'** meaning. Biblical literalists act like the Scriptures were written to teach high [theology](#) and support [sermons](#), but they were written to show us how God works in the day-to-day world we live in.

This word is often used when Christians fight amongst themselves. When people fire out words like 'infallible' and 'inerrant', 'literal' is usually launched with them.

What many people mean when they say 'literal' is '*face-value*' or 'in the *strictest / narrowest* sense'. But the [Bible's human writers](#), like most writers everywhere, don't just operate at face value. How can anyone who believes in an [unseen spiritual realm](#) be satisfied with learning just the face value or the narrowest sense of anything? *Spirituality is about what lies beneath the face*, a wide realm of complex simplicity and the deepest of meaning. There is another side to it, though: it's foolish to simply disregard the literal face value meaning, for it's what the fuller meaning of the word grew from. A word starts from its face value, but rarely stays there. And you can learn a lot from the trip it takes.

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"As soon as you think you know what the Bible is, you turn the page and it turns into something different."

-- **Rowan Williams**, fmr Archbishop of Canterbury, in **Being Christian** (Eerdmans, 2014), p.25

Literalism and the Bible

A site user emailed me this :

- > Another problem I have is my continued doubt about the inerrancy
- > of the Bible and the need for literal interpretation of the
- > Bible (particularly the account of creation and the rejection
- > of science by many denominations).<

I try not to use terms like '*infallible*' or '*inerrant*' word of God, because the church of today uses them for dividing people instead of helping them embrace truth. It's best to look to the Bible for faith and [faithful](#) living rather than science. It tells facts, yes, but it tells them in order to tell the **truth**. You can look at the site <http://www.spirithome.com/bible-descriptives.html>, if you want more on that. You may not agree with all of what's there, but that's fine - you are to believe the God of Scripture, not a web site.

You can also literally find a definition for '[literal](#)' in the dictionary.

How Does It All Add Up?

One of the lessons of biblical criticism is that **the Bible is a completely, totally, entirely, unrepentantly biased resource**, first word to last. As I see it, that's what makes it so *good*. The prophets, priests, story-tellers, and apostles who wrote the Bible wrote it not as a neutral or impartial observation of fact, science, or history, but as an account of God's work written and passed along by His enthusiastic, passionate, extreme, committed, monomaniacally partisan supporters. They *want* you

to lay your life into God's hands. They *want* you to believe the Good News, follow Christ, [love your neighbor](#), and trust the Spirit. They want that because they discovered for themselves that nothing else matters -- or better, that **all else matters *because these things matter***. That's why they wrote! The Spirit enabled them to see through the events of their day to get at the grand purposes behind them. Those grand purposes still underlie the events of our day. God speaks to us through the Bible as it is, above any other source. Most of us are too busy being obsessed partisans of our selves to see God's purposes. The Bible takes us out of that. Concepts like 'inerrancy', 'infallibility', and 'literal' are not needed to do this task; indeed, they are so artfully constructed that at times they get in the way of believers and non-believers. **Trust the Spirit who's using the Bible, rather than the words people invent to describe the Bible.**

What Measures Up?

The words described here deal with matters of authority and measure. Christians read the Bible to [learn what it says](#) about God, ourselves, and our world. It does this through the story of the history of the Israelites, of the earliest Christians, and most of all, through the reports about Jesus of Nazareth's life, death, and return to the living. We look to the Bible to tell us what it is to be a follower of Jesus the Christ, and sort out our own lives and deeds, as persons and as a [gathered fellowship](#) of followers of Jesus, based on what it tells us about that. For building the house of your life, it's more of a conceptual drawing than the technical engineering specification plan. As you regulate your way of living, the Bible's more of a constitution than a code law. (Indeed, we are instructed by the apostles *not* to live as if it were code law.) Even so, those who read the Bible need to read it as the expression of love that it is. It's fired up with love for a God who first loved us. We can trust that, even if a particular thing in it is amiss, we can pledge ourselves to live and learn in the covenant with God which no other source can quite express.

The Bible as the Authority

Authority [< Latin *auctoritas*, < *auctor* (the one who created it) < *augere* (to create < to grow something)]. **Who/what we turn to in order to settle questions.** We turn to the one(s) who made it to find out what was really said or intended.

Authority figures have wide influence in their field, sometimes using it to bring order to otherwise-chaotic situations. The Bible is held by most churches to be the sole authority for most matters of faith and Christian living. Christians can argue, but they turn to the Authority to make their case. Christians in developed countries are becoming ever more restless with the idea of an 'authority'. They fear any '*authority over*' them, religious or otherwise.

But the Bible is *not that*. It is not a rule book. Its authors did not have many of our own questions of today in mind when they wrote it, and even where the questions were the same, the situation and the effect were at least somewhat different. They were faithfully dealing with the world as it was then, and that leads us as we faithfully deal with the world as it is now. The Bible is firstly an '**authority to**' or '**authority for**'; *it has a purpose* for which it and it alone is well suited. Also, there's One who *is* 'authority over' us (unless we are foolish and egotistical enough to think of ourselves as if we are God), and this One communicates to us firstly through the Bible. The Bible is authoritative *because of*

the One who stands behind it and its authors - the Author of all, the only true authority. And it is authoritative because of the report it makes, the story it tells, the truth it shares, **about a loving God's dealings with our wayward species**, especially about Jesus the Christ. God is re-making and redeeming this created world, through God's own love and intent and deep involvement. The Spirit, through the Bible, tells this story and shows how God literally fleshes out what that means, by working among us *through us*. And the God of the Bible, through the [gospel message](#) in the Bible, gives *us* the 'authority to' live freely in a manner fitting to God's purposes.

There are many terms used for saying what the Bible has authority for. The most common words which describe what's been meant by that over the years are :

- **living** (how Christians live day to day in the world)
- **doctrine** (what Christians teach each other about the faith)
- **conduct** (the manner, tone and demeanor in which we act as people and as Christians)
- **practice** (what Christians do as acts of faith: worship, devotion, prayer, and anything else we do when gathering or acting specifically in Jesus' name)
- **theology** (how we think and speak of God)
- **doctrine** (what we teach as beliefs about God, and about ourselves and our world)
- **mission** (how we share the faith with others, and what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves)
- **identity** (who and what we are *together* as followers of Christ)
- **witness** (how we communicate the good news of Christ).

Not all Christians accept the Bible's role of authority on some of these, and those that do often mean different things by it. But when they start to step away from the Bible, their answers become less rooted in the Christ of Scripture. That Christ is the one who ultimately defines the Christian faith on all the matters listed above.

Also, if you're into nuanced scholarly works, read what Anglican bishop **N.T. Wright** wrote about [the Bible's authority](#), in a 1989 lecture. And, a [Lutheran](#) look at it from **Jeremy Myers**. [back to word list](#)

Norm

Norm [Latin *norma* (a carpenter's square); < assumed Indo-European *gnō-*. Akin to 'know', 'gnosis'] **A 'norm' is something by which other things are measured and judged.** When building something, a norm is used to make sure that the joints are at the proper angle, so the structure holds up. When the Bible is called the 'norm', it means that the structure of **what we think, teach, and do must measure up** to the standards of Scripture. A norm helps stop us from getting carried away with ourselves and our supposed new-found wisdom. Many theological [traditions](#) speak in terms of the 'norming norm' or 'norm within the norm': **the Gospel message of God's [forgiving love](#) in Jesus Christ**. This means that all the rest of the Bible is measured according to (or is 'normed' by) Christ and the Gospel message. The Bible is the norm because of who stands behind it and whose story it tells. This puts the main focus where it belongs -- Christ, not Moses or David or Paul or John, or even the Bible itself.

A word like it is '**basis**' (a basic foundational principle; an underlying state of affairs).

The term 'normal' originally meant 'according to the measure', or 'fitting the established pattern'. But in typical daily talk, it means 'average', 'typical', 'usual', 'everyday', and 'common'....(yawn).... The Bible is **not 'normal'** in this sense. It's quite [unique](#) and unusual, even though it takes place in the rough-and-tumble world we live in. What it tells us is in many ways different than what we take in from our 'normal' world. The world and the Bible operate under different norms, and it is the world that's askew.

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You can also check out how the [dictionary](#) defines '**norm**'.

Standard

Standard [< Old French *estandard* (a place to make a stand or rally the troops; a stronghold), < assumed Frankish *standhard-* (stand firm, hold fast)] **something used for measuring, or for evaluating how good other things are**. A standard is chosen because its quality is already known and highly esteemed. The Bible's quality has been established as a standard by thousands of years of use, and by its ability to surprise us and prompt us to change even today. As with the other terms about the Bible's quality level, its being a '**standard**' comes not so much by the work itself, or by the church leaders who first called it the standard, but by the One who stands behind it. Other terms with a meaning like 'standard' are '**benchmark**', '**yardstick**', '[norm](#)', '**gauge**', '**criterion**', and '**scale**'.

The Bible's effect on a believer's behavior is sometimes described as a '**pattern**'. That works if by 'pattern' they do not mean a precise or exact form. A pattern can intentionally look nearly the same at a distance yet may have many differences when seen up close. There are many different ways to make the same overall pattern.

There are two similar words to 'standard' worthy of note: [model](#) and [touchstone](#).

Canon

A related word is '**canon**', which is Greek for 'measuring rod', probably from Greek *kanna* ('stiff reed'). In our times, the term usually refers to the books of the Bible. The list of measuring-stick books are different with different believers: the Catholics and Orthodox have more books in the First Covenant (OT), often called the Apocrypha. Jews have several 'layers' of their Scriptural tradition: the five books of Moses come first, then the prophets, the histories, and the writings (such as Job, Psalms and Proverbs). The common factor is that in the first few centuries of the Church, these were the materials they discovered to be trustworthy for building the mind of faith and the community which lives it. That is, the Spirit did its most definitive work through these writings. Then, the Church faced [major challenges](#) on matters of faith, and officially recognized the role of the written witnesses that led them through it. This is the Bible we now have today.

This selection or 'canon' bears witness to the work of God among humans, as well as the work of humans who do not regard God. The witness is born through different writings, stories, songs, reports. Each has its own part of the message, and each has a track record of their impact on [the believing community](#). What is most helpful *now* may well be less helpful a generation or a century from now - and then be central again to the next one. That means if we just get rid of or ignore the parts we don't

favor now, we do so at the peril of those who come after us. Those witnesses may be needed for what is to come, as God so chooses. That is why they are kept in the canon.

There are also some writings which aren't part of a formal canon and *aren't intended* to be canon, but are sometimes used as a 'second-order' tool to measure things up. The Talmud is not a 'canon', but a resource of continuous discussion of matters of living the life of Jewish faith; even so, the Mishnah has some measuring-stick effects. For Muslims, their canon is the Quran, but they have very distinctive interpretive traditions in which certain early interpreters of the Quran, and their schools of thought, hold much sway on Muslim practice. For creedal Christians, the ecumenical creeds have some measuring-stick uses, but the use is derivative. The creeds are norms only by being a short version of the key truths taught by the canonical Scriptures. For Catholics, [official dogma](#) serves in a measuring-stick role, and they even use the term 'Canon' (in a different sense) to describe it.

Whenever you hear things about what the Bible says about Scripture, remember that the Scriptures Jesus, John, James and Paul referred to are "the Law and the Prophets", not the Gospels, Acts, or Paul's letters.

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the Bible as a Model

model [Latin *modulus* (small measure), from *modus* (mode, measure, manner); from assumed Indo-European *mod-o-* < *med-* (to measure, to take appropriate measures)]

1. **an example for purposes of imitation or emulation, or proposed as being worthy of such.**
The Bible contains in it the lives of Jewish holy men, most notably Jesus. If nothing tells us how Jesus lived, we could not know, we'd be left with emulating our lives based on poor guesses. Also, the Bible itself passes to us an element that marks the Christian community: many authors, over many centuries, with many different points of view, all pointing to the same thing. So it is with the Christian community, sometimes in spite of itself.
2. **a description or analogy used to help [visualize something](#) (such as an atom) that cannot be directly observed.** The truth is, we don't live when Jesus did. So the Bible leads us to envision how it was, to picture God in terms of body and clothes and dirt and strain and blood. And it gives us many ways to envision God's Kingdom.

The Bible as Touchstone

Touchstone: a dark [stone](#) (like basalt or jasper) **used as a standard or norm for figuring out the quality of precious metals.** The metal would be drawn across the stone, and the streak would be compared with the streak of a standardized alloy to see if it was at least as good. A Greek word, *básanos* has this meaning, but Luke 16 uses only its folk-meaning of 'tormented' or 'tortured'. In the ***Formula of Concord*** (*Epitome, Rule & Norm*, 7), Lutherans called the Bible the touchstone by which all teaching must be recognized and judged. This leads to the question, how does my life and thinking streak out on the Bible touchstone?

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You can also check the definitions of '**standard**' in the [dictionary](#).

Also, there's an interesting discussion of the analogy of the Bible as a [constitution-of-sorts](#). Read the comments too, and remember it's just an analogy.

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For further study, there's more on the Bible as [Scripture](#) and as [God's message](#). Also, [why it is so important](#), and some hints on [how to study the Bible](#).

Why Think On These 'Message' Words?

The words below are offered to stir some thinking about the Bible, especially about its role in your life and that of believers in Christ as a whole. Take up this challenge: think prayerfully about the use of each of these words.

- Are they useful, and in what ways?
- What does this word mean for how I read the Scriptures?
- How does the word go too far, or not far enough?
- How does the way I think of the message get in the way of the message itself?
- Am I seeing it as rules to follow, or as signposts on a journey?
- There's a place for words that confine and words that broaden - what does this word do?
- Is it theological gibberish?
- Who has said such things before, and what did it lead them to do?

If you find out what you really think of the Bible, it can lay the groundwork for how you learn Jesus through it. Or you might find you have some lessons to learn about where you're starting from. The Spirit is inviting you into the Scriptures. Take the challenge! Spread the Word!

Word!

Word [Old English *word*, < assumed Germanic *wurdam*] In a religious context, 'word' is **what God says and does**. God spoke, and the universe, light, earth, and life were created. God spoke loudest, clearest, and most transcendently by coming among us in Christ Jesus, being executed and being arisen from death. **Word up!** People who use the term are usually talking about the Bible, which is the central witness to Christ. They often speak of the Bible as "God's word". Some notes about that:

- It's God's Word for you, but it is more a *we-Word* than an I-Word. It works as God's Word by telling us not just about Jesus, but about His Father, about the course of faith history Jesus said He was fulfilling, and by showing its immediate consequence, the beginnings of the Church. We are a part of all that, through baptism.
- Many Christians today are shaping some form of a *three-fold* description of what is meant by 'Word', in order to try to do justice to how the Bible itself uses the term. Some mainline-renewal Protestants speak of God's word as written (the Bible), spoken (preached, taught, borne in witness), and tangible (Christ as God-with-us, and in sacrament). ELCA Lutherans, in their

[church constitution](#), speak of the [Word of God Bible](#) as being Jesus himself, the proclamation of the message as Law and Gospel, and the Scriptures.

- It is often said that God's Word is not the Bible itself, but is *in* the Bible, or the Bible *carries* or *bears* the Word. Martin Luther, Karl Barth and C.S. Lewis, among others, have written about this. What these authors mean is that the Bible's words themselves are not *the* Word of God, not even when taken together. **The Bible is God's Word *solely* because God the Holy Spirit chooses to definitively speak to us through it** to lead us to Jesus Christ and to learn what it means to follow Him. Trouble is, scholars and seminarians find it very hard to resist the idea of trying to separate out what is and isn't "the Word". That misses the point: God speaks to us through *all* of it, even in its errors, even where we may be horrified by it, even at moments when the [human author](#) had intentions that may not be what God wanted out of it. It is still God that speaks.

The bigger issue is, why are so many people not listening to any word God says in the Word?

Other words in this same field of meaning include :

- **communication** (the act of conveying or exchanging information, through whatever means)
- **message** (the substance of a communication; the gist or core meaning of what is communicated)
- **report** (an account, presented in detail)

I can't really speak a fresh message to myself. It would be drawn from what's already there and already at least partially accepted by me. A message comes to me from the outside, from somewhere and someone other than me. And I can know it and learn it only as it comes to me. God the Holy Spirit is someone Other than me. When the Spirit speaks through Scripture, it is someone other than me communicating a message to me. It is not a self-conversation, nor is it from others who are in the same dilemma as me. It is an encounter with God, meant to change me.

What is the Gospel?

the Gospel [< OE *gōdspel* (beneficial report) < Greek *evangelion* (good news, good report)] It's a term in the same word-field as 'word' and 'report', and is related to the word "angel". The **core message of the Bible**. In Christian thought, the main reference is to John 3:16: for **God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life**. But that's not the *whole* good news. The good news is God-with-us, Jesus Himself - His life, teachings, death, and most pointedly, His return to be among the living. He is the One who causes our reconciliation with God, who makes us just before God. His own [resurrection risen indeed](#) shows the power behind the purpose; the [promise](#) is that we too shall arise to live in God's new world. The New Testament gospels tell the gospel story, not in lockstep but in unity. There are many other things in the Bible, great and wonderful, but they all exist to further this reconciliation, by God's grace through faith. To understand why *Jesus* was so important, understand the history of Israel, as found in the Old Testament; we call Jesus "the Christ", which means the Messiah who fulfilled the purpose of that story.

There are many things that are not the gospel which are central to the faith. For instance, "Love the Lord your God..., and love your neighbor as yourself". Notice that this is about what *you* are called to do. **The gospel itself is about what God did, and is still doing.**

The Bible Has Human Authors

human authors: Christians believe the Bible was [inspired by the Holy Spirit God](#). This Spirit worked through human authors, poets, prophets, editors, collectors, and such. Because the Spirit inspires, the Scriptures will tell you all the truth you need to follow God. Because the authors are humans, there are culturally-conditioned ways of expressing things, signs of the writers' own character and vision, and different styles and use of words. The Bible's humanness is part of its usefulness and appeal over thousands of years. Whether it's Jeremiah's sense of terror all around, or Nehemiah's first-hand report of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, or the Psalmists' [anger](#) and fear, or Paul describing his relationship with the other [apostles unhappy camper](#), the personal, human part of the writing of the Bible helps draw you in. You recognize it, from your own human experience. Human authors write the words, in part because it is meant to inspire *humans* to trust and to take action. When the Scriptures show God at work, it's usually through humans. God even chose to become a human for us, as Jesus. (That's why this analogy is called 'incarnational'; God's work in the Bible follows the Jesus pattern.) The Spirit inspires each of us and reveals to us [what Christ was here for](#). Then others see Christ in action through us. God uses material people all along the way from beginning to end, and the Spirit is at every step.

The Bible's human authors are part of what makes it so different from the scriptures of other religions. For instance, nearly all Muslims treat the Qur'an as being written by God in heaven in Arabic and then [given over](#) to Mohammed who transcribed it, instead of being written through inspired people. He is seen as the Messenger, not the author. Even so, they have an extensive interpretative tradition. To Mormons, the Book of Mormon was 'discovered' by Joseph Smith, but at least in their case someone was reportedly inspired to translate it.

What 'Human Authors' Does *Not* Mean

More and more, some people are branding what the Bible says as "man-made rules", which they can then simply ignore -- or worse, they can see it as something from which they need to free themselves. Well, yes, it was written by human beings, but that doesn't make it evil or stupid. The Gospel writers were not out to put anyone in chains, or make anyone obey an organization (especially, not an organization that didn't exist in anything like its current form until three or four generations later) or a set of rules. Nor are they lying to you about God. They were simply sharing with everyone about what had set their nation, and them (and us) free.

"The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not 'the Word of God' in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we (under grace, with attention to tradition and to interpreters wiser than ourselves, and with the use of such intelligence and learning as we may have) receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message."

---- C.S. Lewis, *Reflection On the Psalms*

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Narrative

narrative : [Lat. *narrāre* (to tell a story), originally from some form of assumed Indo-European **gnō-* (to know)]. In a 'narrative method' of looking at the Bible, **the context, roots, and importance of what's found in the Bible is found in its story line**. All parts of the story find their meaning within the course of this narrative. The method isn't without its problems. For one: the story is much greater than the sum of its parts, but you can't really know the story without grasping its parts, especially when the story develops from real life. Each passage must have its full due, even when it seems to go against the flow, even if it does go against the flow (it may show us a [paradox paradoxically](#)). Even so, 'narrative' approaches focus on what's most important in the Bible, the story line. For a Christian, the 'story line' of God's work among human beings is the good news of Jesus Christ and through Him, the reconciliation of all that exists with its Maker. The rest of it may be good to know, helpful, and even God's blessing for you, but it is this story line that's the 'why' for the Bible and each passage in it.

What's Meant by Original Autographs of the Bible?

Autographs : The **original written parchments/slabs/papyri** used by the Biblical authors when first authoring the Biblical books. This is supposedly the 'most purely [inspired in the ink?](#)' -- and thus most [infallible by humans?](#)' -- form of the Biblical books. These are long since all gone, and were probably all gone within several generations of being written. (Notice how silent the early church's writers are about their existence.) Thus, reference to them in defending the **authority** of a text is an act of fiction. What we have now is all we are likely to ever have: a set of written works whose oldest existing copies are at least several generations of copying from being original. It is these copies, with all their occasional scribal errors, expansions, and such that are translated into the written materials through which the Spirit speaks today. If we found 'autographs', that would be wonderful, but we haven't and probably won't. The Spirit works through our copies, and thus our copyists' errors.

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The Bible as Perspicuous (or Clear)

perspicuous. [< Latin *per-* (through) + *specere* (to look, view); related to Eng. "perspective".] **Clearly and directly communicated or presented**; lucid, readily understood.

To say the Bible is 'perspicuous' means that it doesn't take any specialized training to grasp what the Bible's telling you. This is not a license to be ignorant. You still need to take the time and effort to think it through. There's no required method for that. (True, there are some mysteries, but these confound even the wisest.) The unschooled and the retarded often show a solid grasp of the main thrusts of the Bible. That's because **[the Holy Spirit translucent wants us to know such things](#)**. The

Spirit is the one who reveals it to us. The Spirit can work through an awareness, a happening, a life experience, a method of study, or anything else to make clear to us what is being revealed through the Bible. Idiots and geniuses alike can be fools and jerks about Scriptural matters, but they and everyone in between have what it takes to grasp the [core message get the gist](#). That is what's meant by 'perspicuous' - not that you *will* understand but that you are *capable* of understanding. The clarity of the Bible is not something that applies to each passage standing by itself -- some of those are *quite unclear*. Clarity is not a matter of the words, the writers, or the language, but of the purposes of Scripture and the Spirit who speaks through it. And we do not see the full glory of God when we read the Bible. God hides just enough to give us room to probe, wonder, ask, and try out what is in the Bible, so we can more fully draw it into ourselves.

Making Ourselves Perfectly Clear

At this point, it should be clear that the word 'perspicuous' is itself not perspicuous to most people, since they've *never heard of the term*. Thus, you should use another word for it (and the noun 'perspicuity'), for clarity's sake. Other words in this same field of meaning include :

- **clear** (without cloak, cloud, haze, or disguise; distinctly visible) and **clarity** (the quality of being clear)
- **transparent** (fully revealing, without hiding or blocking out; showing through)
- **lucid** (easily-understood; intelligible without exerting a lot of effort)
- **understandable** (able to be thoroughly known)
- **readily-grasped** or **comprehendable** (able to be known in a way that can be put to use)

Scripture Interprets Scripture

the "**Scripture interprets Scripture**" approaches : Through this approach, **what the Spirit is trying to tell us through Scripture is unlocked by, tested by, qualified by, and balanced by, the whole of Scripture**. No part of the Bible is slighted or ignored -- but no part of the Bible stands on its own, apart from the meaning of the whole and apart from other specific parts which deal with related matters. Since the Bible is the way the Spirit reaches us, the rest of the Bible is the most reliable resource for finding what the Spirit is saying in any one section of the Bible. This often forces us to accept some amount of vagueness and paradox, since both are found all over Scripture and cannot be wished away. [Narrative](#) methods are a modern reflection of this approach.

Some (especially fundamentalists) hold that only Scripture interprets Scripture; however, **that's not how the people [in Scripture](#) used earlier Scripture**, and that doesn't help us learn how to live by it today.

Can I Interpret the Bible's Way?

The Bible itself shows the many ways the [covenant contract](#) people used for trying to get at what God wanted from them. Some of these are familiar to us: the prophets, written histories, etc.. Some of them are not so good: casting lots, putting out fleece, calling on mediums, establishing a corps of 'royal' prophets, following stars. God had already told them that most of these methods were *never to be used* for this all-important task. Superstition is not the way. Yet, they tried it anyway. And strangely enough, God spoke very clearly through each of them. Why? Because God wanted them to get the message while at least someone was listening (God, of course, is fully able to use *anything* to do it). Also, it was sometimes so they could face Divine displeasure at their treason in using such methods. Some of us today use methods that are kindred to those bad methods (such as in most end-times interpretations, and [bible codes](#)). Using Scripture as the foundation for interpreting Scripture takes us away from that. Yet it's not helpful to say, "well, I'll just interpret like the *New Testament* folks do." At times they (most notably Matthew) used Hebrew Scripture out of context to make the otherwise-solid case for Jesus' fulfillment of earlier Scripture. The earliest Christians knew what Jesus was face-to-face, either by Jesus Himself or the ones He directly taught. They couldn't look at Scripture the same way ever again. These human authors, in a sense, worked backward from the Jesus they knew, a method which at times changes the context of what was originally written. It's like it's got one of those warnings from TV infomercials: "don't try this at home". But as with the more ancient Jews in the histories, God used them anyway to communicate, even when they didn't get it right.

What's Meant By 'Synoptic'?

Synoptic : Greek, "**of one eye**". The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called this because they are similar works to each other, for the most part covering the same events and using most of the same sources. The Gospel of John, however, is very different in the order of events, which events are described, and the point of view taken about the life and ministry of Jesus. Therefore John is a Gospel, but not Synoptic. In recent times, Bible scholars have re-discovered the fact that each Synoptic Gospel has its own very special slant. Though they're not anywhere near as different as John's Gospel is, the Synoptics are each different works with their own vision to share.

You can also check the [dictionary](#).

How is the Bible Like A Window?

Window and Verbal Icon: These are terms spun from Eastern Orthodox ideas. The Orthodox treat certain pictures, paintings, and other visual art of holy people and events of the Bible, especially of Jesus and Mary, as windows from which to see Jesus and the Kingdom of God. The Bible is, in this view, **the earthly eikon of God's love and God's intent for the created world**. More precisely, through it we can discover who God-with-us, Jesus, really is. Just as we can envision spiritual matters by meditating on a visual icon, so also the Spirit uses the Bible as the window through which the Spirit reveals Christ to us. The Bible ranks above visual icons, because it is the source of what is depicted in them.

Another word in this same field of meaning is '**window**', a place to look through to see outside or beyond, while being inside a wall of shelter. The word was originally poetic -- a "wind-eye". In a lighter vein, a related word is '**peephole**'.

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The Bible is Inspired

Inspired : "*breathed in*". **The Holy Spirit works in and through the Bible, makes the Bible possible, and makes it work.** The Spirit inspired its (human) writing; The Spirit inspired the church's (human) selection of its content; the Spirit inspired its (human) [interpretation](#) over the years. The Spirit inspires us (humans) today when we read it with the eyes of [faith](#), or hear it spoken or interpreted aloud, or see it truthfully portrayed and followed (by Spirit-led humans). **The Spirit fills the whole process**, every step from ancient event to you. One biblical term for the Bible's inspiration is Greek *theopneustia*, "**God-breathed**". Because it is so specially inspired, there is much literature, art, social conscience, personal experience, and [patterns of relationship](#) that are *inspired by* the Bible. The Holy Spirit brings you into the Bible's stories and its story line, leading you to discover how it is *your* story too.

There are other words which mean something like 'to **inspire**':

- to **animate** (to make live, to give zest, passion, or interest to; to cause someone/something to move or take action.) In Genesis, the Breath animates the shaped mud that becomes Adam. In Ezekiel, the Wind animates the bodies of the dead nation Israel.
- to **enliven** (to make live, breathe life into)
- to **evince** (to cause or prompt a response that is not automatic, instinctual, or habitual)
- to **invigorate** (to give energy or vitality to. This is most used by some Charismatics.)
- **moving** (adv.) (evoking a deep or strong emotional response that leads to action.)
- to **stir** (to put into motion by circular agitation, usually in order to mix ingredients) or **stir up** (to rouse from repose or indifference into action. This is often used by mainline Protestants.).

There is also the specific kind of divinely inspired speech known as 'prophecy', which is reviewed in greater depth on other pages at this site, including on [prophecy itself](#) and on [prophetic history](#).

Through the Bible, the Spirit gives us God's [promises](#) and comforts. The Spirit inspires us through the Bible to respond to God's gifts of salvation, grace, and forgiveness in Christ. The Spirit [patterns or trains our behavior](#) through the stories and persons of the Bible, including the negative lessons. The Spirit uses the Bible to cause new and/or renewed life to begin, to see and live beyond the world we live in and take part in. The Spirit acts to inspire us to go a step past just learning something about

Scriptural times - stepping us into a [different and fresh future](#). If the Bible can be at all called 'the church's book', it can only be because of how the Spirit inspires Christ's followers through it. Thus it is firstly 'the Spirit's book'.

Verbal and Plenary Inspiration

Two other words are sometimes used for describing how the Bible is inspired. '**Verbal inspiration**' means that each word in the Bible is fully inspired by the Spirit - each word is a Word from God. The other term is '**Plenary inspiration**' (Latin *plēnus*, 'full'). It means that the inspiration of the Bible as a whole is special and equal *throughout*. The words are usually used together, as "verbal plenary inspiration", but, like inerrant and infallible, sometimes pitted against each other, as "verbal vs. plenary". These words are mostly found in Calvinist and Reformed-oriented writing, that is, in Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and most Evangelical circles, though it occurs elsewhere as well.

Verbal inspiration fits especially well with the view that the Bible is inerrant, in that if each word is a word from God, it can't be in error. For problems with that, see under [inerrancy](#). Most mainline Protestants refuse to use the term 'verbal inspiration' or 'plenary inspiration', and believe that not every word in the Bible is equally inspired. Some, for instance, speak of a 'canon within the canon', certain books and passages which bear the purposes of God in a way that can lead us in interpreting the rest. Some Protestants even believe that there are words and phrases and happenings in the Bible that are not inspired at all. Often, this comes from a sense of justifiable horror at some of the truly cruel and murderous stuff that's found there. Yet it must be said that our judgements can't help but be full of human hypocrisy about such human deeds and about our place with God. Most experienced Bible readers understand that humanity's darker sides, even those of the very-human inspired Biblical authors themselves, have key lessons to teach us from the Spirit, and are fully part of its story and thus its inspiration.

I think it's best not to use either 'verbal' or 'plenary' to describe the Bible's inspiration, because *most people don't know what they really mean - not even the people who use them*. The terms are most often used for arguing doctrines and polemic (fighting-word) disputes. They are used as *presuppositions*. That is, instead of discovering its truth, one *starts* with it as true and then forces everything else to fit into it - *even if it can't*. This blocks you from listening, which in turn blocks the Spirit from inspiring your conversations and thinking. Instead, say their most helpful meanings in a different tone and a more understandable way by using other words, such as those found on our [word list](#).

Other views:

1. A [defense of verbal inspiration](#) that is from the main stream of supporters of the concept, from **John Battle** at Western Reformed Seminary.
2. An [examination of plenary inspiration](#), in part 6 of **Lorraine Boettner's** treatise, found on the reformed.org site.

How does the Bible Reveal?

Revelation and **to reveal** [Latin *revēlāre* > *re-* + *vēlāre* (to cover) > *vēlum* (veil, opaque separation)].

There are matters we could only have any knowledge or understanding about if God told us. For instance, how could we really understand anything about God -- character, will, plan, being -- if God didn't show it to us? We lack the needed '[omniscience](#)' to figure it out ourselves (that is, we don't even come close to knowing enough to do it). We'd be left with natural vague hints and intelligent wild guesses. We'd be on somewhat better ground about ourselves, but even there, we still can't seem to figure out for ourselves why we are unable to straighten ourselves out, why we hate, why we hurt those we love, and why it is that the better we become at doing things, the better we also become in ever-deeper evils (such as H-bombs, monopolism, [mind manipulation](#), and ethnic cleansing). Learning about such things takes '**revelation**': **the One who knows shares this knowledge with us**. Which is what God offers to do, as far as we listen. That's what the Bible is: God sharing these truths with us. That's what the prophets and [apostles](#) did. Christ was Himself the greatest revelation of God - watching Jesus is to see what God is really like. Through these writings, the Holy Spirit reveals to us that God's already done God's part in restoring our relationship with God, yet is still doing more. The Spirit then goes on to reveal us so much more -- what God has given us, how God wants us to live and to treat each other, deepening our relationship with God, about love and fellowship and [family](#) and justice, and even about the time to end all time when the healing will be completed and *all will be revealed*. The Spirit [lifts the veil](#), and thus frees us. The primary way for the Spirit to do this is by revealing it through the Bible.

Christians are very unlike Muslims on this matter. To a mainstream Muslim, the Qur'an reveals God's will and message, but not God Himself - not character, not plan, not depth of love, and not His divine nature. In Islam, Mohammed is the *messenger* of God, not the revealer of His character.

Theologians and apologists use many terms to describe types or means of revelation. One is *general revelation*; this is what happens when a person thinks or takes action and in so doing they learn what God wants of them (even if the person is not or not yet a Christian). This is often contrasted with *special revelation* - which is when God takes specific action for the purpose of revealing, such as in prophecy or the Bible. God's ultimate special revelation is Christ Himself, for it is through (and as) Christ we know God's character and purposes -- God's very being, letting us in on what we could not otherwise understand or even imagine.

There are words related to '**revelation**' that are not hard to define :

- to **expose** (to remove protective cover, allowing outside forces to influence, affect, judge, or damage.)
- to **disclose** (to make known something that is already there or already true, as if by removing an enclosure. The word emphasizes that which is uncovered.)
- to *share* (in the sense that friends or 12-step groupers tell each other close personal information, emotions, or experiences.)
- to *show* (to cause or allow to be seen, direct one's attention to. This word emphasizes the intent that it be seen.)
- to **uncover** or **unveil** (to remove a cover over something, allowing what was under it to be seen. The emphasis is on the act of

removing the covering.)

God's not trying to keep any secrets. God's just looking for someone who'll listen.

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The Bible As the Source

Source [< Old French *source* < Latin *surgere* (to rise (from), surge)] **Where it comes from.** The Latin word gives a picture of spring water rising up from the ground.

The Bible is the source of all Christian ways of thinking, a Christian view of the world, a Christian way of life, and Christian teachings and beliefs. US liberal Christianity challenges this description, by saying that it is better to draw their way of life from the world around them and be open to seeing the world in ways very different from (even opposed to) what is found in the Bible. They hold that the Bible is 'a' source rather than 'the' source. This has been said before in Christian history. Those who hold this view, then and now, gradually become less and less recognizable as Christians. The Bible is the only reasonably accurate report of Jesus and the early Church. It is the only place you can find what those who lived with Jesus discovered about Him. Thus, it is the only source for finding out what makes a Christian a Christian. It's not wrong to draw from other sources, but the Bible provides the way of recognizing *how* and *what* to draw from those sources. The more a person draws from somewhere else, the more they become something else.

One of the key characteristics that shows that the Bible uniquely reveals God and God's purposes: **when you draw from the Bible, the Bible sends your focus back onto God.**

There are other words whose definitions are in some way connected to viewing the Bible as 'source':

- **wellspring** or wellhead (a source of water for an active stream, well, or spring.)
- **cradle** (a low, small bed for infants, who are most precious -- thus also, what holds the precious communication from God. Also, a place of origin or starting-point. This term was used by Martin Luther.)
- **nest** (a shelter made by birds for holding their precious eggs. Also, a refuge or safe haven.)

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Can We Trust the Bible?

This page is about describing the Bible with words about its authenticity and truthfulness. A lot of people are making claims that there were conspiracies that forcibly limited the content to

what it is today. This is not the place for me to argue against them by way of historical fact, though I can. I will leave you with one thing that can be pretty well demonstrated based on actual historical information. By the time the books emerged as [Scripture helpfulness](#), ca. 200 AD, Christians still didn't have much central authority beyond one's own diocese. They were still struggling amongst themselves about many core matters of the faith, like what Jesus was and how the Spirit worked within us and in society at large. Even their foremost leaders were disputing these things, and would continue doing so for another century or two. The people and their leaders knew where they would turn in order to sort that out: the books they had already learned to trust most from day-to-day experience. These became our New Testament. They judged that these works told believers what they needed to know to live the faith, and taught them how to dialogue and relate with God in their lives -- that is, that these books were up to the task ahead of them.

The words below are offered as a place to start thinking about the Bible, and its role in your life and that of believers in Christ as a whole. Each term has a different shade of meaning. My hope is that as you think about these words, you'll be challenged to think about the Bible itself, its role in *your* faith, and how much you actually trust it. Please take up this challenge: think prayerfully about the use of each of these words.

- Is it true and/or useful, and in what ways?
- What does it mean for how I read the Scriptures?
- In what way(s) does the word go too far, or not far enough?
- There's a place for words that confine and words that broaden - how does this word do this?
- is it intellectual gibberish? Is it used as a weasel word that people hide behind? How? Why?
- Has it been mostly used as polemics (fighting words)? Is it intended to abuse or dismiss an opponent?
- Who in the past has used this word, and what followed from it?
- *Can* I trust the Bible? And if I can, what can I trust it *for*?

What Is Authentic?

Authentic [Greek *authentikos* (of the author)]. Real; matching the truth or fact, and thus reliable or verifiable.

The Bible is what it claims to be, and is not an imitation or con job. It really *is* from God, and really **is** what God reveals to us about us, about our world, and about God. There are some well-publicized forums where they vote on what they believe is and isn't really historical or is and isn't really said by Jesus or the disciples. Their conclusions have at times been helpful in stripping away some of the illusions which have been shielded by Christian [tradition aged truths](#). Yet, they seem bent on trying to create a new image of what Jesus was, and that image has a surreal feel to it. A sense develops that their 'historical Jesus' is a fascinating guy but not someone I'd be inspired to follow, much less die for.

Yet the hard and unavoidable fact is that this is exactly what the people around him were inspired to do. The New Testament conveys an inspirational Jesus, an authority Jesus, a Spirit-empowered Jesus, a Jesus who would inspire what we know happened thereafter. An **authentic** Jesus. And it says this Jesus did the one thing most ultimately worth doing, setting us back aright with the Father who loves us. It would take something that big, that real, to be worth more than a passing glance 2000 years later. Through the Bible, the Spirit gives you the authenticity of Christ Jesus, from which comes authentic character and authentic happiness.

Other words for '**authentic**' include:

- **actual** (occurring in fact; in action at the time you are in; now existing.)
- **genuine** (actually having the attribute or character that has been attributed or claimed that it has; honestly experienced).
- **real** (that which in fact is present or occurs; not figmentary or imaginary) and **really** (real-like; having the quality or property of being in fact present or in effect).

What Is Meant By Sufficient?

Sufficient [Latin *sufficere* (to be or have enough) < *sub-* (secondary, beneath) + *facere* (to make)].
Enough; that which meets the needs of right now (or the time period or task one is concerned about)..

When said about the Bible, '**sufficient**' refers to the belief that **what is found in the Bible is all that is needed to be saved by God**. You don't have to go to some other source to find out more for that task. This word is especially important for Anglicans. It also covers the basic outline of how to live the faith together with others who also follow Jesus. Some extremists have stretched this term beyond all sense by claiming that the Bible is 'enough' for designing one's life, and that what isn't there doesn't belong in a Christian's life. *Get real*. The Bible only directly covers a small part of life's doings. It wasn't meant to cover everything; it was meant to convey God's love and God's good news. It has guidance for your life, but it takes thinking, praying, doing, and testing to find out what that is. Yes, shape your life by it, but in God-given freedom. Serve God, not a book. All the foundational and [essential what you need](#) stuff is in there, but you yourself have to work it through.

Other words for 'sufficient' include:

- **ample** (of large capacity; more than enough to meet the purpose at hand)
- **enough** (adequate to meet the need)

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What Does 'Timeless' Mean?

Timeless: what the Bible teaches transcends the eras in which it was written or edited, is still true and

important today, and **will continue to be true and important** tomorrow. This does not mean that every aspect of it is 'timeless'. For instance, what was important about the [widow giving money](#) in the Gospel of Mark was not its specific value in ancient currency -- which is dated and of its time -- but that she gave for God's purposes from what little she had -- something true of the faithful poor in any era. As with anything else eternal or [supernatural unseen](#), the timeless truths of the Bible show themselves through the natural and time-bound. That's the same way Jesus shows the character of God. So each Bible story is very much a part of its time, but a part of its message is very much a part of our time, and that of those who come next.

Other words for 'timeless' include:

- **enduring** (continuing, lasting)
- **lasting** (remaining for a long time; durable)

What Is Trustworthy?

Trustworthy: You can rely upon it. The Spirit is working through the Bible, thus you can turn to it and trust that you're not being tricked. You can set your life on it. Many millions of folks from many eras have set their lives well by it. Some folks do so thoughtlessly or sloppily, but as often as not it still comes out well anyway. As is true of the other featured words on this page, you can *trust* the Bible because [the One who inspired it](#) is trustworthy, and is using it to lead you. If that were not so, 'trustworthy' would be a most weasely word. Trustworthiness is what people ask of those who want to be an authority on some matter or field of endeavor in their life. But that person must earn the trust and continually prove worthy of trust. The authority's task is not to define trust, but to exemplify it.

Another word for 'trustworthy' is **reliable** (worthy of trust or reliance). The term [believable](#) and the various word-forms of [faith](#) have a stronger underside to them. The Bible doesn't ask you to *believe in* its writings; it asks you to put your trust somewhere else - namely, in the God of the story of the Jews and the early Christians, the only God who actually *is*.

What's Meant By Truthful?

Truthful: It tells the truth. God will not deceive us. Neither does the Bible, when it's read for what it is there for. We can trust the Bible to lead us down the right path, because the Spirit speaks through it for that purpose. Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "[what is truth?](#)" He wasn't asking about finding word definitions, but about finding (or evading) truth itself. Today, people ask that same question, in a world where things are not as they seem. Some are cynical that there is at all such a thing as 'truth', much less that anyone is full of truth. Many think of the Bible as a 'spin book' for either an established hierarchy or for a God of cruelty and irony. The truth is, the New Testament is biased and not at all impartial: it has something it wants everyone to know. I can't prove what it claims. I can only [testify tell it](#) to the truth of that something, or rather, someone - Jesus.

Other words for 'true' or 'truthful' include:

- **forthright** (direct, with no evasion or deliberate unclarity)

- **truth-telling** (communicating matters the way they actually are).
- **bona fide** ('good faith'; a mental and moral state of honesty; true, genuine; a conviction as to something's truth, or its being morally upright.)

"The truth that makes possible truthful speech, heartfelt speech, is a person. The "it" in "Because it is true" is a person. Truth for us is not a principle or system, not a structure of correct insights, not a doctrine. The expression of the truth may use any of these means to say what is true, but as Barth rightly insists, "Jesus Christ in the promise of the Spirit as His revelation in the sphere of our time and history is the truth." Only in the person of Christ are we encountered by the one who can unmask our illusions without utterly destroying us. In Christ we are made intimate with God, making possible a nearness from which we do not flee."

----- **Stanley Hauerwas**, from 08 May 2012 commencement address, Seminary Of the Southwest

The Bible Is Essential

This Christ-Following Stuff Can't Be Done Without It

Over the years, there has been a steady stream of movements within the learned folks of the Christian churches, colleges, and seminaries which have tried to wean the Church from its dependence on the Bible. They've pointed to errors of facts and even of judgement by its human authors. They've pointed to how illogical it sometimes is. They've applied all sorts of literary and historical criticisms to it, and said all sorts of things about the supposed motives of the very human **authors**. They've applied comparative religious studies to the Bible to show the many ways it is like other religious books. They've condemned how it speaks of war, brutality (including that which appears to be required by God), slavery, gender, human goodness/evilness, progress, family, sex, commerce, cultures, other peoples, and just about everything else, and decided they can ignore those parts, or even that such things make rejecting the Bible an essential for a healthy mind. They've explained away all miracles, all demonstrations of power, all of anything that would make the leaders of the Testaments anything worth remarking about. They've read it through the colored glasses of the faith as they want it to be, usually according to a political philosophy or an economic status. They've selectively used it to try to get Christian believers to go along with the latest social trends of the day. They've blamed the Bible for nearly every ill that has ever beset any believers or any group of believers.

In the Bible, they find the core, the grid, the backbone, the safety net, the content, the meat, the direction of not just their relationship with God, but also their relationship with

Still, in generation after generation, those who truly seek a relationship with God eventually stumble their way to the Bible. They find themselves touched, strangely warmed, dumbfounded, and even struck to the floor in tears. They find this to be true even of the hard parts, the ugly parts, the bizarre parts, the parts they hate, and the parts they can't explain. They see a vision for a world that is strangely familiar yet starkly different than the one we live in today, and discover where the hints of this other vision are sprouting up in the world we know. In the Bible, they find

humankind, the rest of creation, and with time itself.

God there with us in our best and worst, in the kinds of happenings that make for life in the pivotal moments and in the day-to-day. In the Bible, they find [the core](#), the grid, the backbone, the safety net, the content, the meat, the direction of not just their relationship with God, but also *their relationship with humankind, the rest of creation, and*

with time itself. They find the untold depths of real-ness of prophets, chosen leaders, a chosen people, apostles, deacons, and sons of encouragement -- a real-ness they can't find in the increasingly false world they live in. They discover what changes, what is essential, and how the two are not mutually exclusive. They find what [love](#) really means and where its roots are. Most importantly, the Bible is the witness to the life of the One person on whom all of this hinges, the only One who gives the phrase "relationship with God" all of its true meaning. The One, Jesus of Nazareth, the Anointed One of God.

For anyone who wants a close relationship with God (to the extent we can want such a dangerous thing), the one and only indispensable place to turn is the Bible. If you don't, you won't even learn what such a relationship looks like, or how it works. The Bible is where the Spirit is most at work.

The following words are terms that many Christians use when they try to describe the role [the Scriptures](#) play in shaping the Christian faith. **None quite fit**. All the terms lack something, or are easily stretched to mean more (or less) than they do. But you'll get the gist of what these words tell you about how important the Bible is to getting the relationship right.

When talking about the Bible, what is :

[Central and Hub](#), [Essential](#), [Foremost](#), [Important](#), [Incomparable](#).
[Indispensable](#), [Key](#), [Leading](#), [Only and Singular](#), [Paramount](#), [Peerless](#).

[Pre-Eminent](#), [Primacy](#) and [Primary](#), [Principal](#), [Significant](#), [Supreme](#).
[Telling](#), [Unique](#), [Unequaled](#), [Unmatched](#) and [Matchless](#), [Unrivaled](#), [Vital](#).

What Does It Mean To Be Essential?

The main word here that describes the role of the Bible is **essential** [< Latin *essentia* < *esse* (to be; is)] **something you cannot do the task without**. Because there are no other reliable sources to tell us about Jesus, His ministry, and the start of the Christian church, the New Testament must be seen as the essential record for those who would follow Christ or even for those who just want to know what that means. The Hebrew Scriptures are essential, too, since Jesus said he came in fulfillment of it.

Another word in the same direction is **indispensable**. (You can't get rid of it and still hope to get to your goal or rightly do your task.)

You can also check the [dictionary](#).
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What Is the Primacy Of the Bible?

The words about the [Bible's effective place](#) tell us only about its role in making things happen. They don't tell us of its rank among all else that God uses to grow us and change us. Rank is a matter the Bible itself rarely speaks about. It speaks of the importance of heeding Jesus and the Prophets, it shows the people of the Bible [respecting or disrespecting](#) the Torah, but nothing much directly about the rank of the whole thing. In part, that's because when it was being lived, there *was no whole thing* yet. In part, that's because Scripture's not into itself, it's into you and your living a life that pleases God.

But over the years, thinking Christians noticed how the Spirit led them through these writings beyond any others. This led them to gather them together and recognize their role (that is, recognize them as the Scripture they had already proven themselves to be). This collection, which we call "the Bible", was then ranked for what its parts had shown themselves to be, as the **#1 place** from which to draw our thoughts and visions of God and Godly living.

Related Words

There are words which are used for describing this rank. Two of these are the terms **primacy** and **'primary'** [< Latin *primus* (first)]; they mean **'first in rank'**, above all others. Anglicans are most keen on those words. Many other Christians find some of these terms to be excessive, or are used merely to pile on unneeded superlatives. Some are much more helpful than others. These other like words include:

- **foremost** (the one that is most in front or out-front; most prominent, of first rank.)
- **incomparable** (having nothing that compares to it in quality, impact, [beauty](#), or other describable characteristic.)
- **leading** (of first rank; something that foreshadows coming changes)
- **paramount** (of primary concern or importance.)
- **peerless** (without equal in importance or stature.)
- **pre-eminent** (excelling above all others; that which stands out over the others.)
- **principal** (foremost in rank).
- **supreme** (biggest, highest, most powerful, and most commanding.)
- **unequaled** (having no equal.)
- **unmatched** and **matchless** (no one and nothing else can achieve as much or be valued at the same level.)
- **unrivaled** (having no rival for dominance.)

The inference on most of these words is that it is not first 'by a nose' or by a tiny bit, but is the rather clear champion and master of the task.

"Most Important" not "Exclusive"

The word 'primary' infers that **there are others** ranked below it. We learn from living, doing, reading other people's works (including those of other philosophies and religions), practicing our traditions, listening, and paying attention. Our relationship with the God of the Bible teaches us about how to

dialogue with other sources, and how to discern the truth where it is found. The rest can have much truth, but it is the Bible where we find the answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?"

Because the Scriptures are specially inspired by God for the task of communicating God's ways, they are the home base from which all other matters of life and spirituality travel. The Scriptures rank :

- over the other writings of the Jewish and early Christian faiths (even such hallowed works as the Didache or Sirach or the Mishnah).
- over [tradition](#) as a whole.
- over your spiritual experiences.
- over anyone else's spiritual experiences.
- over moral codes, canon law, or the rules of an organized religion.
- over what you think 'can' or 'must' be done in the current situation of your life.
- over your conscience, in the sense that Scripture is what you are to use for *training and shaping* your conscience.
- over theologies, psychologies, sociologies, and ideologies; indeed, over all -ologies and -isms.
- over culture and trends.
- over mystic dreams, insights, and prophecies.
- over logic and deduction.
- over saints and popes and councils and assemblies.

Not that any of those are *unimportant*, but those are all *less* important, even taken together. The Bible is what you check these other sources and resources against to see where God is and isn't at work -- the Spirit uses it to tell us what and how to do as God wills, and when and how we are going astray.

Don't Use This Word

One word that must *never* be used for the Bible is 'sovereign'. It means 'one who rules' or 'ruling over all'. That term can only be used of a being or entity, not an object, and in the Christian faith it is strictly reserved for the Trinity perichoresis, and particularly Jesus, who is called our 'Lord', a term of sovereignty applied to emperors of his day. Only God is sovereign, over us and over the Bible. The Bible's authority for Christians is totally *derivative* and not its own; it is an authority only because it bears God's Word, and thus God stands behind it. You live by the relationship with God which the Spirit uses the Bible to shape in you; you do not live by the Bible or any other book.

Only and Unique, defined

Only [< assumed Germanic *ānlik* (one-like)] means **alone in its purpose; sole**. It's usually used with words like 'norm', 'rule', and 'source', often in the form of the Latin 'sola' (alone). It's most often used by Lutherans, who got addicted to the word by using it with '[grace](#)' and 'faith'. When 'only' is used about the Bible, it means that no other documents, creeds, sources, resources, and such, and no leaders individually or collectively, can act to **define** the way Christians have faith ([belief](#)), think and speak of

God (**theology**), teach Christian beliefs (**doctrine**), act as a church (**practice**), honor and praise God (**worship**), develop a relationship with God (**devotion**), communicate the good news of Christ (**witness**), and carry out their daily activities and relationships within an unbelieving world (**Christian living**). It is the central source from which you discover what you are to do as a follower of Christ (**vocation**), and who/what we are together as followers of Christ (**identity**).

Only the Bible fills those specific roles. "Only" is the kind of word which grates against the ear of today's people -- we hate exclusive claims. But, truth be told, the 2000-year experience of Christ's followers is that **no other source actually gets the job done**. The Bible is the source **the Spirit chose** to use for this purpose. True, *the Spirit also speaks through other books, arts, resources, events, experiences, and people*, but the Spirit doesn't use them **definitively** to set the course or direction, or give you what you're to measure current actions and happenings by. Through Scripture the Spirit tells you *how* to use everything else, and *why* the Spirit is working in the world around you. The historic creeds of the Church are often said to have a role in defining Christian beliefs, but their role is *derivative* - that is, they define by distilling in a short form the central matters of belief originally found in the New Testament. Only if you know your Bible are you able to rightly discern when God is speaking through those other sources, **because that's where the life and purpose of Jesus Himself is shown**. That said, the Bible's role is *also* derivative: it derives from the Holy Spirit that stands behind it and the Christ it tells you about.

Not Only Source, But Only *Definitive* Source

Now, think about what was written above, about 'primary'. Among other things, the Bible teaches you how to recognize *what the Spirit is doing in other sources*. That means the Spirit *is* working through other resources. Thus, to use the word 'only' to *exclude* the other sources entirely is both foolhardy and futile. The Bible itself makes no such claim. Neither does the long record of tradition's use of Scripture. Instead it shows the people of earlier times weighing other information according to the previous Word of God or the prophets who speak with God's authority, and **then using the other stuff** accordingly. You can't use "the Bible only" for life even if you wanted to. Life is bigger than that, God's Kingdom is bigger than that, and **so are you**.

Unique

Another word with a slightly different shade of meaning is **unique** [< Old French < Latin *unicus* < Latin *uni-* (one, only)]. It means **unlike anything else; distinctive, alone in kind, standing apart from the rest**. A similar word is '**singular**'. The Spirit worked in a unique way to create the Bible. The Spirit operated in a unique manner to spread it around. The Spirit acts uniquely on you when you read or hear it. The Bible is unique, just as each person who reads or hears it is unique. These things are each true in a way that is true of no other book. That makes it 'one of a kind', not just one among a gazillion books on spirituality, holiness or philosophy. Many Christians prefer using the words 'unique' and 'singular' to 'only', since in their base meaning they do not signify exclusion of other sources. (But when used as Christian theological tradition uses it, neither does 'only'.)

Related Words

There are many words that speak to the Bible's effective place among the other sources and forces that shape a Christian's faith :

- **central** (in the middle of it all; of basic, core, or controlling importance) and **centrality**.
- **hub** (the center of activity or interest; focal point.)
- **important** (having a strong effect on what happens.)
- **key** (that which unlocks or provides access to something.)
- **significant** (something whose presence is a sign of what direction is being taken.)
- **telling** (sharply effective in a way that shows the core or real reasons of the matter, or reveals the direction of a continuing event.)
- **vital** (that which gives life, energy, or activity). This is used by most Charismatics.
- **weighty** (of much consequence; being so massive that it has considerable effect on what surrounds it.)

The Bible's Effect

This page looks at the meaning of terms that describe the ability of the Bible to bring about change, action, and repentance turn around. Also, it defines words that describe how the Bible teaches you, and helps you have greater impact as the Spirit impacts *you* through it.

The words below are offered as a place to begin to think about the Bible, and its role in your life and that of believers in Christ as a whole. Take up this challenge: think prayerfully about the use of each of these words. Are they true and/or useful, and in what ways? What does that mean for how I read the Scriptures? In what way(s) does this word go too far, or not far enough, and does some other word describe it better? There's a time and place for words that confine and words that broaden - how does the word do this? Or is it intellectual gibberish? Who in the past has said such things, and what did it lead them to do? If you find out what you *really* think of the Bible, you can lay the groundwork for how you learn Jesus through it.

When talking about the Bible, what is:



The Effective Bible

Effective [< Latin *effectus*, past part. of *efficere* (to accomplish)]. **It is capable of causing its**

intended effects.

The Bible **succeeds in doing what it is created to do**. Through the Spirit's work, it shows God, God's vision, God's purposes, and God's good news to us. Our collective openness to the Bible seems to be shrinking, but the Spirit is still using it to pry us open to God.

Yet, there is this warning from [the Gospel of Luke](#). This is at the end of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The rich man begs to Father Abraham to send a warning to his five brothers that they not land in the realm of torment like him. Abraham says that they have Moses and the prophets to warn them. But the rich man persists, asking that someone be sent from the dead, so that they would change their ways. But Abraham says, "If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded by someone rising from the dead." The last part is a reference to Jesus. But the first part is a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures of their day. God had already told them plenty. They knew better than to live the way they live, with no love for the poor or oppressed. But they chose to live without regard to what the Spirit says. The Bible can teach you, and even stuff your mind. But if it doesn't change how you live, ultimately, [the Scriptures are of no help to you just a book](#). That becomes a matter [between you and God](#).

Other words like 'effective' include :

- **efficacious** (has, or is fully able to have, a desired effect)
- **effectual** (has the desired effect; enough for the purpose at hand)
- **able** (has the resources to accomplish its purpose)
- **consequential** (bringing about significant events or changes)

You can also check for [effective](#) in the dictionary.

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The Bible is Decisive

Decisive : When something is called the **decisive factor**, it means that it is **what causes things to be the way they will become**; it sets the path, tips the scales. When someone is a **decisive leader**, that person is someone who leads without blind impulse but also without waffling. Such a leader is focused, direct, and purposeful; any differing thoughts in that leader's mind are harnessed to make the decision wiser, better, clearer and fuller. A *decisive moment* is a turning, tipping point, or even revolution, when the changes stop being potential and start taking effect.

And so it is with the Bible. When you're waffling on how to live your life, or even on knowing what a Godly life is, Scripture can be decisive. It shows the way to go; it is what is given to you by God to set your path and tip your scales. And it is bypassed only at great spiritual cost. But it is still *your* decision, and *your* change.

Other words in this same field of meaning as 'decisive' include :

- **crucial** (a crossroads, a moment or test of supreme importance)
- **critical** (a turning point; that which demands vigorous evaluation leading to an important decision)
- **pivotal** (that which swings a decision or course of action; of central importance)
- **convincing** (an argument or act which changes minds and decides a course of action)
- **incisive** (done in a way that is direct and decisive or compelling, that cuts through to the heart of the matter as if with surgical knives or lasers).

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The Bible is Potent

Potent : [< Latin *potens*, pres. part. of *posse* (to be able) < *potis* (able) + *esse* (to be) < assumed Indo-European *poti-* (a root word indicating ability or power to accomplish)] **Strong, vigorous; able to get a task done; exerting strong influence, control, or authority; able to cause reproduction.**

The Holy Spirit, as God, has the power to touch people through the Spirit's tool of choice, the Scriptures. Touch, heck -- often the Spirit really lays the hammer down, smashing to pieces your strongest resistances and shaking your worldview at its foundations. That's what being 'potent' is about. Through the Bible, [the Spirit](#) has moved many people at roughly the same time, with ideas whose time has come or a new awareness of what's really at stake. Even after thousands of years, the Bible still causes its readers to give birth to new ideas, expressions, and angles on the challenges of life. It exerts an influence over each Christian's life.

Other words like 'potent' include :

- **forceful** (that which has power or strength)
- **cogent** (convincing by being presented sharply or by argument that's to the point)
- **compelling** (forceful in a way that one finds oneself driven to urgent attention or action)
- **impelling** (moving someone to act urgently from their own motivations)
- to have **impact** (to have forceful effect on something else)
- **impressive** (striking, affecting strongly and favorably)
- **reproductive**, and also to *breed* or *spawn* (to generate, make more like it, to make many to follow up on what it does or is).

The Bible is Striking

Another like term is '**striking**' (as an adjective). One of the most common occurrences people have when reading the Bible is when they're busily reading, plugging ahead with nothing happening, and

then suddenly they come across something that **hits them like a baseball bat**. They get stunned, can't get it out of their mind, and are caught in a eureka moment where they see things differently. This is done by the Spirit. Not that all the Spirit does through the Bible has "pow!"; most of what happens is gradual, adding up, accreting. But "*pow!*" happens quite a bit, and lives get shook by it.

You can also check the dictionary for [potent](#) and [striking](#).
More on [being struck by it](#), from **Ann Voskamp**.

The Bible is Useful

Useful (adj.) [< Old French *user* < Latin *uti* (to use, utilise)] **Having a beneficial or practical application; able to be put into service for a purpose..**

Most terms for describing the Bible are not words that the Bible's inspired writers used. (They were too busy living it to spend much time thinking about how to describe it.) However, in [2 Timothy 3:16](#), it says that the Scriptures are God-breathed ([inspired](#)) and *useful* (for [teachinglearn!](#), [trainingworkout](#), and correction). The Greek word there is *ophelimos*; the root meaning has to do with using something in order to progress, gain, or profit.

Other words in the same field of meaning as 'useful' include:

- **beneficial** (that which enhances well-being.)
- to **deepen** (to go further beneath the surface or beyond the obvious, to build up or fortify what buttresses that which is visible.)
- **fruitful** (bringing about an abundance of something, esp. fruit)
- **gainful** (that which produces gain or benefit.)
- to **grow** (to increase by degree; to develop and reach maturity.)
- **helpful** (aiding, providing effective assistance.)
- to **intensify** (to feel more deeply, make a more extreme or focused effort, to have more in less space.)
- **positive** (making for growth, progress, improvement, or forward movement; a [yesthumbs-up](#).)
- **productive** (that which causes favorable results; able to make something, or make something happen, abundantly.)
- **rewarding** (that which causes benefits or accomplishment due to diligent labor or effort)
- **utility** (the quality of being able to be used effectively for a task; *usefulness*); also, related words like '*utilization*'.)

Two other such words, 'progress' and 'profit', are best avoided in the context of the Bible's usefulness. These words carry far too much partisan and polemical baggage in philosophy ('progress of humankind'), politics ('progressivism') and economics ('profits'). Not that these are themselves evil things; they may even be good at times. But their sharply partisan meanings would give a false impression about the Bible, and thus those words should not be used.

The Bible is Instructional

Instructional is another of the words like 'useful' which spring from 2 Timothy. The Bible **teaches us what God most wants us to know**. It enlightens or illuminates the way forward in a world of shadows.

The Bible itself has two key things to say about this: [Matthew 22:29](#) and [2 Timothy 3:16](#). In the Matthew verse, Jesus tells us that if we come to [understand Scriptureintimately](#), we will not spend

our time on working out the technical details as these Sadducees did. Instead, we'd focus on [what God is revealing](#) in Scripture - in this case, that there is a resurrection, and that resurrecting and restoring is the way God does things. In 2 Timothy, Timothy is being told that through the Scriptures he has known from childhood (that is, the Hebrew Scriptures), he has been given the tools he needs for the task he's about to be given in Chapter 4. He's told that Scripture's really good at such teaching and training. "Reproof" and "correction" refers to the work of Scripture as the '[normnormative](#)' for instruction. "Teaching" and "training in righteousness" refer to this *instructional* work of Scripture, so that the believer can tell the difference between the insight given by God and [the ear-tickling stuff](#).
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Other words with meanings like '*instructional*' include :

- to [edify who's Ed?](#) (and the related word '**edification**')
 - **educational** (that which causes people to learn)
 - **didactic** (morally instructive)
 - **to teach** (to give out knowledge)
 - **to train** someone (to teach specific skills needed for a specific task or calling)
 - **>to wisen** or enwise or **make wiser** (to *impart wisdom*).

You can edify yourself by checking the dictionary for '[instructional](#)' and '[useful](#)'.

Reading the Bible Prayerfully

Private, prayerful Bible reading is intimate and personal. It's like exploration - it takes daunt and derring-do to dare to do it right. Be fearless -- ask God to show you, through the text. The very act of telling God about it turns even your bitterest thoughts into a strange kind of prayer. God's seen much worse out of us. You won't be struck by lightning for having even thought of what you're thinking. The decision to [entrust](#) God with the matter turns the strongest [doubt](#) into an act of faith and the most stubborn question into a plea of faith.

Much of the Bible is actually made up of prayers. Many of the Psalms and sections of the histories and the Prophets are prayers. The New Testament letters contain short prayers, such as the one in [Ephesians 3:14-21](#). The best-known prayer in Scripture is [the Lord's Prayer](#).

The Bible can also be the hub of your own prayers. No prayer method is needed, but for some of us, a method may help us stay focused, disciplined, and open-hearted. One of the oldest is 'Lectio Divina' (divine reading), and it's geared toward helping us listen to the Spirit that speaks through Scripture. One form of it goes like this: first, [quiet](#) your mind down. If you find that hard to do, it often helps that you focus on taking deep breaths. Once you're gotten some focus, begin softly speaking or whispering a chosen Bible passage. Then, read it again real slow, this time listening for a word or phrase that stirs you, speaking again and again until one stands out. Then stay with that word or phrase, and ask why the Spirit is stirring you with it. Take what you're thinking, feeling, and remembering, and offer it back to God in prayer. Then repeat the process. You'll be finished when you get a sense of peace about it. Or, you may finish with a sense of exhausted disturbance, in which you know you've poured it out

for now, but you're still being stirred in a way that may only be resolved as the day goes on. (If so, return to that word or phrase throughout the day, and see what it has to do with your life.) Most people who use some version of the Lectio find that at some time during it, the Spirit reveals something about living the faith.

A site with helps on [daily devotions involving the Lectio Divina](#). Sacred Space, an Irish Jesuit site with [prayer and devotional sessions](#)

Prayer For Guidance and Wisdom

Let us ask the Lord to broaden our ideas, make them clearer, and bring them closer to the truth, that we might also understand the other matters which He has revealed to His prophets. May we study the Holy Spirit's writings under the guidance of that same Spirit and compare one spiritual interpretation with another, so that our explanation of the texts may be worthy of God and the Holy Spirit whom inspired them. May we do this through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom glory and power belong -- and will belong throughout the ages.

----- Origen

Questions

1. Look at the [list of words](#) that are used for describing the Holy Writ. Which one(s) mean the most to you? Why? Which one do you have the hardest time accepting? Why?
2. What one thing most puzzles you about the Bible? Or about how other folks you know approach it?

For those whose churches/cells/small groups have had to scripturally re-examine its actions or stance on a specific matter:

- How did you turn to the Word of God in this process? What else did you use?
- Were you able to form consensus?
- At what point did you discover that change was needed and actions must be taken?
- In what ways was Scripture helpful? Was there a way it might have held you back in any way from fixing the situation? How?

Try these out:

1. Describe what you experience when reading or hearing Scripture. (I don't mean what you're '*supposed to*' experience. What you *do* experience.)
2. Choose a book of the Bible you've never read before, and read it aloud at the

- loudness and speed you would use in ordinary speech. Read it all the way through, even the technical parts. This can be done a chapter or two a day, which gives you more time to think about it.
3. Or, choose a poetic passage, such as in the Psalms, Song of Songs, or Lamentations. Read it aloud, slowly, giving yourself time to savor it and let it sink in.
 4. Think of Scriptural ideas, symbol, or passages that have affected your life through non-Christian or general-public sources or people. (They're all over the place, but you may have to think a bit to find them.)
 5. Name one thing you have learned from the Scriptures.
 6. When you're studying the Gospel, try memorizing some of the key summary lines Jesus says, or scriptures of encouragement, or some of the [promises](#) Jesus makes to His followers.
 7. If you're reading the Bible in a church study group, try asking yourselves the question: What does Scripture say about our part in the mission of Christ's followers, acting together as his Body?

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