

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### The Christian's Armor: The Sword of the Spirit (Part 2)

There is a new quest taking place across the Evangelical landscape. This is the relentless quest to be seen as culturally relevant. This coupled with the demand to be contemporary and practical have transformed every aspect of Christian ministry. No one has seen as clearly as David F. Wells the impact this is having on the soul of Evangelicalism. "Christian practice is quite evidently taking on its own peculiar form in contemporary America. It is being called upon to assume an overriding importance in religious life, to discharge all of the responsibilities that theology in its comprehensiveness once bore. Being practical now substitutes for being theological, for there is little left to theology except practice. Stripped of doctrinal substance and rendered unreflective about and uncritical of the culture, theology now transforms 'virtue' into a set of everyday skills for finding success in a world of technology and affluence. Knowing how to be religious now means knowing how to 'make it' in a pragmatic world that is decidedly hostile to absolute principles and transcendent meaning and, in consequence, is driven to seek meaning only in self-fulfillment. The fuel for this new practical virtue comes not from the Bible but from the popularized nostrums of psychology, not from the older practices of self-examination and the pursuit of holiness but from the newer concerns for psychological wholeness and happiness in an age of affluence. It should not be hard to see that this new program has nothing in common with the old and that this drastically reduced theological vision has nothing to do with the task that has engaged the church for most of its life."<sup>1</sup>

Our churches have, by in large, swallowed in large gulps the kind of therapeutic psycho-babble that the world serves up as the cure for what ails you. When people do read the Bible they do so in order to find "principles for daily living" or "solutions to life's problems." The Bible is treated like a self-help manual. This is *not* how the Sword of the Spirit is to be used in Spiritual Warfare! In order to properly wield this sword we need to be diligent students of Scripture.

#### I. PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY: PREPARATION FOR BATTLE

Tim Challies recently set forth a helpful way to go about personal Bible study. "My knowledge of Scripture is nowhere near encyclopedic. However, I am quite sure that if I were to sit back today and read the Bible from cover to cover I would not find a direct command from God saying 'Thou shalt read the Bible daily.' I would not find a guide to personal devotions and I wouldn't find chapter and verse requiring daily quiet times. However, neither do I *need* to have that kind of explicit command in order to understand the value of spending time every day reading the Bible.

When I think about the area of daily Bible study I find my mind drawn to the issue of assurance of salvation—whether or not a Christian can be certain that he is saved. I think I am led this way because the Bible is so central, so integral to the Christian life, that to feel no love for it, no desire to study it, must be a sign of spiritual sickness. I would certainly never say that a person who does not want to study the Bible or who does not enjoy studying the Bible is not a Christian. But I *would* venture to say that the Christian life is so dependent upon Scripture that a person who has no regard for the Bible and who shows little interest in it would have good reason to seriously consider his

salvation. Such a person would do well to examine his soul to see if he really has come to know the Lord. Let's look to

just a few reasons why we, as Christians, should desire to know and study the Bible.

- A. The first reason is that God draws an undeniable link between our knowledge of the Bible and our ability to live in the way he commands us to live. In 1 John the apostle writes, 'And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked' (1 John 2:3-5). How are we to know how Christ walked and how are we to imitate him if we choose not to study the record of his life? How can we be obedient to him except by studying the rule he has given to direct us? The Bible is the primary means God uses to teach us about himself and to challenge us by the Holy Spirit. 'And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual' (1 Corinthians 2:13). So to be people who are obedient to God and who do his will, we must first know this will as he has given it to us in the Bible.
- B. The second reason is that God tells us that our desire to learn about the Bible and its doctrine is a sign of spiritual health. In 1 John 4:6 we read, 'We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.' Those who are truly saved will long to be taught the Bible by skilled teachers and by the spiritual authorities God has placed in their lives. They will long to know the Word of God.
- C. The third reason is that the Bible sets us free to glorify and enjoy God. 'And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:32). The truth, as we learn it in the Bible, gives us freedom to honor God through our lives. It sets us free from legalistic attempts to please God and frees us from our false views of God. It sets us free to know God as he is and to worship him as he is. It also sets us free from falling into the all-too-common trap of basing our standing before God on the times we've done our duty in studying the Bible. Too often, I think, we allow our daily performance to be the basis of our standing before God. If I've done well in reading and prayer, I feel God's acceptance; if I have avoided or neglected it, I feel God's disfavor. But through the Bible we learn that our standing before God, our acceptance, is based on the work of Christ, not our performance, however good or however poor.
- D. A fourth reason is that without a knowledge of the Bible we expose ourselves to doctrinal error. We are susceptible to heresy. C. Fitzsimons Allison noted: "That the human heart is a 'veritable factory of idols' is truth attributed to various Reformers. The heart is certainly 'far gone from original righteousness,' and it is a filter through which the gospel must pass in its hearing and telling. Each heresy in its own way encourages some flaw in our human nature. Without appreciating this human factor one could be led to believe that orthodoxy is a relatively simple matter: the results of proper research and scholarship. The human factor makes us acknowledge that research and scholarship itself must pass through the heart of the researcher and scholar."<sup>2</sup>

In the face of this testimony, knowing that the Bible is so central to the Christian life, does God really need to command us to study it and treasure it? No! Christians should be drawn to the Bible the way a baby is drawn to his mother's milk. It is the Bible that feeds us, that nourishes us, and that equips us as saints that bring glory and honor to God. As Simon Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!' When we wish to live in a way that pleases God, we must turn to him, to the ways he has revealed himself in Scripture. A spiritually healthy Christian will read

the Bible and will *want* to read the Bible.

Now I'd like to make a rather practical observation. A general desire to know and to study the Bible does not necessarily mean that we will always be overflowing with enthusiasm to do so. When we say that we desire to study the Bible we can mean two things. We can mean that we spring out of bed in the morning eager to rush to a comfortable chair and spend some time drinking in the Word of God. Though I think all Christians long to be like this, the sad fact is that very few are. The reason I am writing these words today is that I have felt little of this enthusiasm lately. I've found myself dreading times in the Word far more than I've eager anticipated them. And I hate this, I hate my lack of interest, my lack of passion and desire. And yet, it seems to be where I am right now.

However, even if we do not have an overflowing passion of this nature, we can still desire to read the Bible in a less passionate (but no less sincere) way, knowing that the Word feeds us, that it tends to our souls, and that we would be remiss to ignore times of Bible study. Even on days when our hearts are not pounding with excitement as we turn to our Scripture reading, we can still desire to read the Bible. We can do so out of some duty rather than full delight. In either case, we are right to turn to the Bible and to dedicate ourselves to reading and studying it.

My encouragement is not to wait until your heart longs for nothing more than to study the Bible before you open the cover of the Book. Rather, commit today to beginning to take time every day to read it. Ask God to give you the discipline to do so. Commit to spending even just a few minutes reading its words and a few minutes more to seek ways you can apply it to your heart. God will speak to you through his Word and show you the infinite, eternal value of studying the Bible. And as he does so, he may just transform some of that duty into a greater measure of delight.<sup>3</sup>

**CONCLUSION** : Just as Mormons are conditioned to read the Bible through the eyes of Joseph Smith, so many Evangelicals are conditioned to read the Bible (when they even take time to read it!) through the lens of the surrounding cultural and its therapeutic mindset. David Wells writes about this change by noting: "At the heart of this new reading of the parable is a rather different understanding of the self from what prevails in classical, Protestant spirituality. There, the self is not to be treated as innocent, nor is it to be indulged. Indeed, sin is defined in terms of self-love, self-centeredness, self-delusion. But here, in this stream of modern spirituality, the self is understood in terms of psychology. The self is unhappy, not so much because of sin, as a lack of realization, or an inability to adjust to the social environment. So conversion in these sermons was presented as incorporating God into the self so that the self could have more meaningful relations with others. 'God is the clue to one's true self,' declared one preacher. And underlying this is the same belief about the necessity of the self's openness that characterizes contemporary psychology. That is, we all have the capacities for deep, meaningful relations with others, but in order to realize these relations we must give expression to our feelings even as we must listen respectfully to others who bare their feelings. 'Self-knowledge and self-disclosure,' Witten says, 'are essential for an intimate relationship, these sermons suggest, even though self-disclosure places people at risk of embarrassment and attributions of weakness.' However, this self-revelation is so expressive of what we are innately as human beings that it carries with it a blueprint of what we were originally in the Garden of Eden. The feelings therefore become a kind of inner voice that tells us who we are. That we are often not 'in touch' with our feelings provides the most pervasive understanding of sin in these sermons. As the title to Witten's book suggests, this is, indeed, the 'secular message in American Protestantism,' even as it is also a new, modern mysticism. The biblical teaching about sin is thus domesticated to accommodate secular notions about the self. These are widespread in the Church today, mediated through safe Christian channels such as the booming book and video market, as well as being absorbed from the workplace movies, and television. This teaching is domesticated to meet the cultural needs for tolerance. In most cases, this seems to happen intuitively and apparently with very few intentions of bypassing what Scripture actually says. The world in which the cultural demand of tolerance is heard is one in which all values are privatized. People can believe what they want and, within the law, do what they want, but it becomes intolerable if they imagine that what they believe includes standards of belief and morality

that are applicable to others. Today, that is the unforgivable sin. It is the blasphemy against the (secular) spirit.

What we think of the self and what we think about God are closely related. And what the study of these sermons showed is what we see everywhere else. As the moral nature of the self is lost, the understanding of God's holiness as part of his transcendence is also lost."<sup>4</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth Or Whatever Happened To Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993), p.112.

<sup>2</sup> C. F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy* (Moorehouse), 1991), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.challies.com/print/4555>. I have modified Challies structure.

<sup>4</sup> David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why The Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 50.