

The Christian Use of the Bible

ALAN G. NUTE

Mr. Nute is a well-known Bible expositor, based in Bristol.

The Christian use of the Bible depends on a truly Christian attitude towards the Bible. That, in turn, arises from a proper conviction regarding its nature. Let there be a belief that it is God's Word written, that it is the authoritative divine self-revelation, complete and final, and there exists the essential basis and spur for a right use of Scripture.

But this alone is not enough. The individual, the family and the church must be assured that this book is more than all that. There must be an assurance that it lives with the life of him whose word it is. This is not to claim magical properties for the Bible as we shall have cause to emphasize presently. Rather, it is to accept its own claim to be 'living' (Acts 7:38; 1 Pet. 1:23), and not only living but 'active' (Heb. 4:12), dynamic and potent yet.

Further, it is needful that the Christian has a clear view of God's purpose in first giving and still speaking through his Word. That purpose may be summarized as conveying the knowledge of God, creating a response of faith and providing a directive for life.

The knowledge of God stems from the divine self-disclosure made in Scripture. That knowledge centres in a personal relationship. It would be false, however, to divorce that aspect of knowledge from that which consists in the apprehension of truth. The two are inseparable. Thus the psalmist links a meditation upon God's statutes with the seeking of him with the whole heart (Ps. 119:2,10). There is no loftier ambition than to grow in the knowledge of God. The fact that this may be realized chiefly, if not exclusively, 'through a proper use of the Bible should provide the needed motivation for its serious consideration.

Further, it is the basis and source of faith. 'Faith comes . . . through the word of Christ' (Rom. 10:17). So we learn that Timothy comes to 'faith in Christ' and is made 'wise for salvation' because 'from infancy' he has 'known the holy Scriptures' (2 Tim. 3:15). Nor is such faith to be restricted to saving faith. The record in Hebrews 11 indicates that

the word of promise and of command proved ever the ground and energizer of faith. This is a further reason why we should read and meditate upon the Word.

But Scripture is also given as the guide and regulator of life. It 'is useful' Paul goes on to say, 'for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'. It would be difficult to state the practical value of the Bible more succinctly or comprehensively. This verdict of the apostle's is corroborated by many of the Bible's writers. For instance, the psalmist in Ps. 119 refers to it as a prophylactic against sin and a strength in the time of temptation (vv.9,11), as a source of comfort in sorrow (v.28), as the secret of spiritual renewal (vv.37,50,107,149,154,156), and as the spring of prayer and praise (vv.169-172). The one who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates upon it day and night is likened to 'a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers' (Ps. 1:23).

Personal Reading

The biblical testimony to the importance of a daily, meditative reading of Scripture and a careful compliance with its demands, as well as to the blessing which attaches to such practice, is overwhelming. Add to this the corroborative evidence provided by the lives of men and women of God through the centuries, as well as that which arises from personal experience and who can doubt the vital nature of a regular, systematic use of the Bible?

As far as the individual Christian is concerned, this (and it is surely needless to say it) should be on a daily basis. As already noted, the psalmist recommends a 'day and night' meditation upon God's law. To look at the matter ideally, the optimum benefit will be derived from using the Bible in a threefold way. There should be an *extensive* reading of Scripture. This will ensure that the whole book will be covered within a reasonable period of time. This should be coupled with a *meditative* reading of Scripture. By this is meant a thoughtful, prayerful consideration of a relatively short section of the Word. But, in addition, time should be made for a regular if less frequent *in-depth study* which aims at mastering a particular letter or book or some important biblical truth. Where this ideal is considered unrealistic it is customary for the devotional use of the Bible to survive, but a good case can be made out for pursuing all three.

The benefit of reading the Bible through in the space of one, two or

three years is the acquiring of an overall view of the book. In addition, there is gradually gained a sufficient acquaintance with the text for one passage to shed light on another, the Holy Spirit bringing to remembrance that which has previously been read. It also prevents imbalance in the understanding of biblical truth.

Clearly, it is a comparatively simple thing to devise a personal scheme for a rapid reading of this sort. There are, however, a number of published 'plans', one of the best known being that drawn up by Robert Murray McCheyne. This requires a daily reading of four chapters and results in the OT being covered once and the NT and Psalms twice in the year. This may sound demanding, but if it is recognized that what is proposed is a straightforward reading which resists the temptation to stop and ask questions, it is not as formidable as it might at first sight appear. The dividends it pays renders it infinitely worthwhile.

In addition to this, or possibly as part of it, there should be what is commonly referred to as a devotional reading of the Bible. This is imperative if the child of God is to grow and progress to spiritual maturity. It involves a listening to the voice of God speaking through the Word. Here again a measure of discipline is essential. There is no greater aid to discipline than habit. It is sensible therefore to decide upon a suitable time to devote to such reading and meditation, and if in addition to a set time there is chosen place so much the better. Much has been said and written on the value of 'the morning watch' that it hardly needs to be repeated here. If God is the God we believe him to be, if he means to us what we claim he does, if we are assured that the Bible is that through which he continues to speak to us today, if we are conscious of our frailty and need, then we will wish to begin the day in his company and over his Word. It may well be that in this spiritual exercise the reading will be but brief. Even so it is advisable to follow some sort of programme so that the Word comes at us from a variety of angles. Some find it helpful to use one or other of the numerous Bible-reading notes which are available. Such can prove a support for those who otherwise tend to lapse from a regular quiet time. The main lessons are drawn, challenging questions are frequently posed, and a 'devotional' application is made. Others would prefer to seek these in the passage themselves, unaided.

Perhaps the greatest danger arises where the subjective desire to have 'a word from the Lord' overrides the objective truth of the Scripture concerned. It is essential to let God be God and to be prepared to accept what he wants to say to us through the particular passage which is set for the day. In this respect, his Word rather than our circumstance needs to be paramount. The immediate, straightforward, in-

context meaning of the passage is likely to yield what we most need to hear and what God himself wishes to say to us. A claimed 'word' from him which is unrelated to the above factors should be viewed with the gravest suspicion. It is more likely to have arisen from self than from the Spirit.

Our most pressing need is to hear and obey what God has to say to us relative to life and conduct in general. There is a tendency for Christians to concentrate too much on what is commonly termed the particular will of God. We may be assured that God is well able to direct his children into that, and will most certainly do so as they are eager both to know and do that will. A confidence in him regarding this has the effect of freeing the Christian from the need and desire to be perpetually on the look-out for some special message in Scripture affording 'guidance'. This latter practice is a bad habit and contains inherent dangers. The great corrective is to rejoice in the promises God brings to us, and to respond to the demands he makes upon us through his Word.

It is obvious that all such reading of Scripture will be prefaced, saturated and followed by prayer. To preface it with prayer is to express our desire that God should address us directly. It is also to acknowledge that apart from the enabling of his Spirit we are incapable of hearing, understanding and responding to the Word. To saturate our reading with prayer is to allow Scripture to become a two-way communication. As for following it with prayer, the Bible may well provide that stimulus to prayer which we so often need. Its statements will engender praise, its promises the prayer of faith, and its commands our earnest supplications.

In his autobiography (p.152) George Muller testifies to the value of this practice. 'I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God, and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprov'd, instructed; and that thus, by means of the Word of God, whilst meditating on it, my heart might be brought into experimental communion with the Lord'. He describes how he did this 'early in the morning'. 'The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord's blessing upon His precious Word, was to begin to meditate on the Word of God, searching as it were into every verse to get blessing out of it; not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word, nor for the sake of preaching on what I had meditated upon, but for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul. The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication'. He proceeds to add that he found in this practice the answer to

‘wandering of mind’ in prayer.

Whilst it must be recognized that we all differ in capacity, opportunity and spiritual gifts, there is a case to be made out why every Christian should attempt (in addition to the exercises already outlined) a certain level of personal Bible-study. This will hardly be engaged in daily, but it is not beyond the ability of the majority to set aside some time on a regular basis for this purpose. Aids, such as concordances and commentaries, are readily available and the benefit gained from such study far outweighs the time and effort required. It is frequently a help to gear such study to the programme being followed in the local church or house-group. For those who wish to fit themselves for the service of God, serious consideration should be given to the possibility of following one of the numerous correspondence courses which are on offer.

Unfortunately, and surprisingly, the point still needs to be made that it is wholly wrong to see any contrariety between a complete reliance upon the Holy Spirit and the exercise of the intelligence with which we have been endowed. We may rightly take comfort from the fact that an understanding of divine things is not dependent on a high IQ rating. At the same time God is not honoured by mental laziness. He refuses to bestow his treasures on the indolent. Yet, being creatures of extremes, we must beware lest we rest content with an intellectual understanding of Scripture, all the while ignoring its true intent. It must issue in a response of worship, prayer, increased faith, and careful obedience.

Balance is also needed in the use of, but not subservience to, the scholar. It is right that we should weigh and benefit from the insights into the meaning of Scripture which result from the labours of those who are academically equipped and spiritually enlightened. Let us recognize this as given by God for the benefit of his people, and as opportunity affords avail ourselves of it. At the same time the notion that such aid is indispensable to a proper understanding of Scripture is both false and inhibiting. God is sovereign and is not hampered where there happens to be an absence of scholarly help. Nor, where it does exist, is he confined to it.

In Family Life

Those who share these convictions regarding the Bible will inevitably determine to give it a prominent place in their family-life. The practice of having a ‘family-altar’, which was fairly common a generation or so

ago, seems largely to have lapsed. A number of reasons may be adduced for this, some more valid than others.

The matter of more immediate concern, however, is the recovery of a recognition of the importance of the Bible in family-life. This principle was established early in Israel's history. Of his commandments God said; 'Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up' (Deut. 6:7). The NT speaks similarly (Eph. 6:4). If a *daily* reading of the Bible as a family is regarded as impracticable then at least let Scripture be referred to constantly, and the whole gamut of ordinary affairs be consciously regulated by its standards. This seems to be the emphasis of the verses referred to above. However busy and complex family-life may be there seems little excuse for not making time for sharing together in prayer and Bible-reading on a regular *weekly* basis — whether on a Saturday or a Sunday. Children will recognize the regard in which their parents hold the Scriptures and its message will be brought home to them and their parents together.

Obviously the style of family Bible-reading will be determined by the age-range and composition of the family. Where there are young children it is obvious that both the reading and the comments on it, as well as the prayer, will be brief. Priority should be given to the interests of the children, and they should grow up with the awareness that today's counterpart of the dead sparrow (? hamster) is of prime concern to their heavenly Father, as well as such mundane (or exciting) matters as clothes and holidays, as the case may be. In this respect, the day in which we live brings great advantages. Never has there been a greater variety of versions (several of which are set at the level of a child's understanding) nor have there been so many Bible-reading notes as are available today.

The great objective for Christian parents should be not only the conversion of their children (it is doubtful whether 'salvation' in 2 Tim. 3:15 should be limited to this), but the establishing in them while still young, of a biblical mind. If this can be achieved then it will affect their attitudes to science and art, money and sex, indeed to life in all its aspects. And right attitudes beget right actions. A mind informed and directed by God through his Word is one of the noblest objectives which Christians may have for their children. It will be the product not merely of instruction but of example. The whole family must respond to the exhortation, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.' Where this is the case then whatever is done 'whether in word or deed', will be done 'in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col. 3:16,17).