

## READING THE BIBLE FOR ALL IT'S WORTH

### Introduction No. 1

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Over the past several years I have given a series of messages to a variety of congregations or conferences around the country. But I have never given that same series here. Some of you have heard those messages on tape and several have wondered why I have never preached them to this congregation. The theme of these messages is certainly something you have heard from me many times, but I never made it the subject of a series of sermons. But several experiences lately convinced me that I ought to be more explicit, more emphatic, more systematic in the development of this theme for the sake of my own congregation. In each case, these recent experiences – a long conversation with some Presbytery men at a recent committee meeting; the report of an animated argument concerning the right preaching of the Bible at the most recent meeting of Presbytery – I was not there but men who were told me about it – and conversations with pastors at a recent Banner of Truth conference at which I was a speaking – , I say, these recent experiences reminded me of dangers lurking nearby in our modern, evangelical culture and of the difficulty that it always is and always will remain to hold fast to the whole counsel of God and to all the teaching of Holy Scripture.

So, I am going to speak to you about how to read the Bible. There are lots of people nowadays telling you how to read the Bible. And many of them have excellent things to say. But, my concern is that most of them impose on the Bible a way of interpretation that, in one way or another, highlights certain biblical themes at the expense of others and so actually silences the Bible at certain points. What I want for you is to hear the Bible speak its entire message clearly and emphatically, to get everything and lose nothing. Now, everyone who recommends a way of reading or interpreting the Bible thinks that he is after the same thing: all of the Bible rightly understood. But it seems clear to me that in many cases one is getting something considerably less than all of the Bible.

Take, for instance, what is called the “redemptive-historical” interpretation of the Bible. This is a view that is common in Dutch Reformed circles, takes much of its modern inspiration from celebrated reformed scholars such as Geerhardus Vos and Klaas Schilder, was popularized in the United States through the publication in 1977 of the English translation of the four volume *Promise and Deliverance* by S.G. DeGraaf, and has been making its way into American Presbyterian seminaries of late. DeGraaf’s great work was written for Sunday School teachers to teach them how to read the history of the Bible, the Bible stories, in a way that is faithful to the Bible’s true message. Interpreters of this school stress the unity of the covenant of grace in all of its epochs and developments and, consequently, the Christocentricity of the Bible. I am simplifying their viewpoint, of course, but these men expect to find Christ the subject of every text and so the subject of every authentically Christian sermon. Christ is the unifying subject of the Bible and nothing in the Bible can be rightly understood apart from him. Well, there is certainly a great deal of truth in that. We have found in our studies of Genesis and 1 Samuel over the last several years that Jesus Christ is everywhere in those books of the Bible. Not only is he the message in many ways and respects, but it was the Son of God with whom the people of God had to do in those days. And DeGraaf was surely right to condemn the moralistic way in

which the Sunday School Bible stories were often taught. David and Goliath was taught as a lesson in what we can do if we trust in God. Daniel and the lion's den was taught as a demonstration of how the Lord will reward us if we are faithful to him, and so on. The revelation of the Messiah, his salvation, and his kingdom in these stories was largely overlooked.

But, this emphasis on Christocentricity has consequences. One of them, and one of the most important of them, is that these interpreters are so wary of the danger of moralism and then of legalism that they are unwilling to face the fact that the Bible does, in fact, have a lot to say about how the Lord will reward those who are faithful to him and about how much we can do if we trust in God. They fear so much the tendency to take a message about Christ and make it a message about man, to take the message of grace and turn it into the message of works, that they do not want to talk about what men should do and how man must work. This tendency to lose sight of God and Christ and grace is a subtle and powerful tendency, of course, to which the church has often succumbed. No one can deny the danger. But in their hands the result is that the imperatives of the Bible are not given their due and, in the minds of some of the greatest of these redemptive-historical men, life applications in sermons are never appropriate. Some of the greatest preaching of the 20th century is found in the three large volumes of sermons by Klaas Schilder, the great Dutch theologian of the mid-20th century, devoted to the trial, the sufferings and the death of Jesus Christ. They appeared in English translation as *Christ in his Sufferings*, *Christ on Trial*, and *Christ Crucified*. There is soaring and sanctified eloquence of a rare type in those sermons. There is some of the deepest thought and the most consecrated reflection on the saving work of Jesus Christ that can be found, in my judgment, anywhere in the history of Christian preaching and writing. But there is not one line of application in those three large volumes. Never once does Schilder tell his readers what they ought to do. Never once does he spin out the implications of these truths for life and godliness. Never does he tell them how they must respond to the truth he has set before them. No, he would say, that is the Spirit's work. When the preacher makes it his work he is in a fair way of betraying the gospel by removing attention from Christ and placing it upon ourselves, from his work to our works.

But this I judge to be a perverse and colossal blunder. It is never what the Bible itself does. It is not what the preachers in the Bible do, the prophets and the apostles. They are always moving from the indicative to the imperative, from theology to ethics, from exposition to application. And what is more, to be candid, in large tracts of the Bible there is more attention paid to what we must do than to what Christ did for us. It is a simple fact and any reader of the Bible can prove it easily enough to his or her own satisfaction.

I think there is great insight in the redemptive historical school of biblical interpretation and great danger as well. And I would say the same regarding several other contemporary schools of thought that wield influence in our American Presbyterian circles. And I would say the same thing about some classic schemes of biblical interpretation, such as the law-gospel scheme of Lutheranism, which has also made its way into some contemporary Reformed thinking about reading and preaching the Bible. You get this, for example, in the work of Michael Horton, which many of us have appreciated. All of these approaches contain important insights. They often were born out of the need to correct serious mistakes in the interpretation of the Bible or the preaching of the Bible. No one should think he cannot learn a great deal from the advocates

of these various approaches. They are usually all laying a supreme emphasis on some very important part of the Bible's teaching. However, in doing that they also tend to minimize other parts of the Bible's teaching. That is where the danger comes in.

I want to provide you a different way to think about the reading and interpreting of the Bible and I want to demonstrate to you first, that it is the way supported by the great tradition of Christian preaching, and that it is the way that arises from the teaching of the Bible itself, it is the Bible's own hermeneutic or principle of interpretation. And, for those of you who feel that you are already near being lost and are wondering what in the world I am talking about, I want to prove to you how practical, relevant, intensely interesting this way of looking at the Bible and its teaching really is. So let us begin.

It was an epoch in my life when I stumbled onto what I have come to think was one of the great discoveries of my life. It concerns the right reading and interpretation and preaching of the Bible but I did not find it in the standard manuals of biblical hermeneutics. It is, in my judgment, one of the most important perspectives that one can bring to the interpretation of the Bible but I rarely see it discussed or even mentioned in treatments of that subject. With one exception. You find this principle clearly expressed and expounded in the great preachers and they made it a cornerstone of their preaching. It is, I believe, fundamental to the right understanding and the powerful preaching of God's Word. It is not widely understood or appreciated today, I believe, and must be recovered if the Bible is to return to its rightful place of authority over the thinking and the feeling of God's people.

I am speaking of the fact that biblical truth is universally presented in dialectical form. By that I mean that the Bible characteristically presents any doctrine in terms of its polarities. The truth concerning any particular subject or theme is taught, now in one place, now in another, in terms of the poles that lie at the opposite ends of the particular continuum.

I worry about the use of the term "dialectic," but haven't yet found a suitable alternative. Perhaps you can suggest one. *Dialectic* suffers, of course, from guilt by association. Christians don't ordinarily take their terminology from Marxists! But the term, I think, does accurately describe the phenomenon I am discussing with you. The dictionary will tell you that *dialectic* refers to the juxtaposition – that is setting side by side – or the interaction of conflicting ideas. Now, in reference to the Bible, we use the term in a guarded way. There are, of course, no teachings of the Bible that are *in actual conflict* with one another, but there are many teachings that *can seem* to be in conflict with one another and, at least, can be difficult to harmonize with one another. And my point is that this difficulty, given the universal presence of this dialectic in the Bible, is clearly intentional. It is the divine pedagogy.

It was, as I said, an epoch in my life when I came clearly to see how this method is everywhere God's method of presenting the whole truth to us. No matter what the subject, what the doctrine, we are given it in dialectical form, one pole here and the other elsewhere. And, what is more, almost never is any effort made to resolve the tension thus created. The poles are counterpoised but never weakened, each presented in the boldest, starkest, unmistakable terms, with the reader of the Bible left with the task of holding together two facts that seem to fly apart from one another.

Sometimes the juxtaposition is immediate and stark, as for example, in *Proverbs* 26:4-5 where we read, in turn:

“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. *And*

“Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.”

(A juxtaposition that had some rabbis debating the canonicity of the Book of *Proverbs*! That is, they were wondering if *Proverbs* really belonged in the Bible because it had a contradiction in it.)

Or, we have *Galatians* 6:2-5, where, within three verses we are told both that we are to “carry each other’s burdens” and that “each one should carry his own load.” Sometimes the dialectic is not quite so stark as that, but still unquestionably and intentionally obvious in a particular context. For example, in the matter of salvation, we get naked sovereignty – with all the bark on – in *Romans* 9 and naked human responsibility in *Romans* 10. Or, we learn that, in Christ, sin shall not be our master in *Romans* 6 and, in *Romans* 7, that Paul, thirty years into his Christian life and apostleship, was still a bond slave of sin.

More often, however, the dialectic in regard to any continuum of biblical teaching is diffused over large tracts of Holy Scripture. There are countless examples. We have it between the triple personality and unity of God, between justification by imputed righteousness in some places and judgment according to our works in others, between texts that teach the security of the elect and texts that warn against the genuine danger of apostasy, between sola fide and the necessity of obedience. The Scriptures teach us in one place that it is the fool who says in his heart that there is no God, and show us in other places the godly, under a silent heaven, beginning to wonder if God is there after all. We are encouraged to believe in one place that if we delight ourselves in the Lord he will give us the desire of our hearts, and told in other places that we must do without what we most long for. We are told here that the Lord Jesus is coming back quickly – that is the phrase that is used: “behold I am coming quickly” – and in another place of his having gone on a long journey and of his servants growing weary waiting for his return. We are told in one set of texts that there is no condemnation for the man who is in Christ Jesus and in another set that *if and only if we Christians confess our sins and forsake them* will God be faithful to forgive them. We are told that the Lord has made all things for his own ends, even the wicked for the day of disaster, but elsewhere a great point is made of the fact that the Lord does not desire the death of the wicked but that all men come to repentance and the knowledge of the truth. We are being troubled today by the so-called “openness of God” movement and there are texts, which read by themselves, give comfort to the idea of a changing God, a God who learns; but set besides those texts in the biblical dialectic are a great many texts that speak of God’s absolute dominion, his infinite knowledge, and his impassibility in the old, strong, biblical sense that God does not depend upon us for anything.

We also find the dialectic in the Bible’s ethical instruction. We have texts that state the equality of men and women in the kingdom of grace in the most absolute terms and texts that are, God forgive us, now an embarrassment to the evangelical church for the emphasis they place on the

distinction of genders. Or we have texts that, taken by themselves, would seem to rule out any use of jewelry or cosmetics, the styling of hair or any other means intended to enhance physical appearance, and other texts that celebrate these very same things. We have texts that decry any attention to outward form and beauty, especially of women, and, contrarily, texts, many texts, in which God himself calls attention to a woman's physical attractiveness. We have texts that seem to suggest that whatever we ask for in prayer we shall certainly receive and texts that so condition God's answering of our prayers that even faithful Christians have struggled to believe that they could ever put up an effective prayer. We have texts that tell us to turn the other cheek and to bless those who curse us and texts that tell us not to cast our pearls before swine. Never is the tension between these polarities resolved, no effort is made to locate a golden mean between them. The Bible virtually never discusses the dialectical tension created by its juxtaposition of truths. But Christians are living with the tension all the time. It exists in their minds and in their lives.

Time after time Christians individually or whole churches mistake the meaning of the Bible because they embrace one pole at the expense of the other, because they fail to respect this biblical dialectic and to preserve the tension between the polarities of truth that is essential both to right thinking and to right living. So you have faith healers telling folk that if only they would believe they would be healthy and rich and happy. And you have earnest Christian preachers telling folk that if they will believe in Jesus Christ they can, thereafter, live as they please and they will still go to heaven. You have many today now saying that if Paul said there was in Christ neither male nor female, then there can be no legitimate argument against women ministers or elders. If God says he desires the salvation of everyone, then surely he cannot have chosen certain ones for salvation. If we are justified by Christ's righteousness imputed to us, then, clearly, our works can have nothing to do with our vindication in the last judgment. If he who began a good work in us will perform unto the day of Jesus Christ, then, obviously, there is no real danger of our failing to continue to walk with God and being cast away. And on and on it goes. In every case, one pole is chosen and the other is silenced or ignored. One theme is preferred to another.

As I said before, the redemptive-historical preachers don't let any emphasis fall on what men and women are to do, or how they are to do it, for fear of encouraging moralism, a view of the Christian life that reduces it too much to a way of life and loses sight of the achievement of Jesus Christ, our total dependence upon the grace of God, and the absolute need to forsake any confidence in our own works. But, the Bible itself often goes on for pages at a time talking about our works, about the manner in which they ought to be performed, the rewards that will be given to the obedient, and the punishments that will be visited upon the disobedient. The Bible also goes on for pages at a time talking about Christ and Christ alone as the hope of our salvation. Not one or the other, but both. That is simply the fact. The way the redemptive-historical men *preach* the Bible is not the way the Bible itself *reads*. And, in the same way, the law-gospel men see the message of the Bible as our great need of forgiveness – a need demonstrated by the law – and Christ's meeting that need – the gospel. But, the Bible also talks a great deal – a very great deal – about Christians obeying the law, about the law of God as a rule for our lives, about how it is to be kept and why. The law-gospel men don't want to talk about that, and if they do talk about it they won't emphasize it. But the Bible talks about it a great deal and makes a major emphasis of it.

As I said, this way of approaching the teaching of Holy Scripture – seeing its penchant for putting its teaching in dialectical form, making us hold in tension truths that are not easily held together – while it may remain unnoticed in the manuals of hermeneutics, has long been a cardinal principle to the great preachers of the Word. Here is Charles Simeon.

“I love the simplicity of the Scriptures; and I wish to receive and inculcate every truth precisely in the way, and to the extent, that it is set forth in the inspired volume... I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding... I would run after nothing and shun nothing... the truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes.”

He goes on to say in this connection,

“Of this [I] am sure, that there is not a decided Calvinist or Arminian in the world who equally approves of the whole of Scripture...who, if he had been in the company of St. Paul whilst he was writing his epistles, would not have recommended him to alter one or other of his expressions.”

Since I first read that in Simeon I have come across so many texts in the Bible of which I was forced to admit to myself that, had I been reading over the shoulder of the biblical author as he wrote, I would have said, “Tut, tut, I know what you are trying to say, but really that way of speaking is open to serious misunderstanding! Take it from me, you would be better off putting it this way.” Think, for example, of Paul’s daring statement in *Romans 7:17, 20* that it was not *he* who continues to sin, but *the sin living in him*. Paul, surely you don’t want to say that! Do you realize what people will do with a statement like that!

Why does God teach his truth in this manner? There are obvious risks to this pedagogy. Paul himself taught free justification in a manner so unqualified he knew would make antinomianism a temptation to many and he stated his convictions regarding the sovereignty of grace so bluntly that he felt it necessary to anticipate both of the objections that have ever since been brought against that doctrine. James taught the necessity of obedience and good works so emphatically and so without qualification that Martin Luther wondered if his little book really belonged in the Bible!

That, of course, is itself a revelation of the pedagogical purpose of this way of teaching the truth. Presented in this way, starkly, without qualifications and mitigations, the point to be made is made very clearly, very emphatically. Chesterton defined a paradox as “truth standing on its head to get attention.” Well, God has gotten our attention by this method of stating truths bluntly, with no effort to qualify, leaving the other side of the picture to be given at another time and in another place. Think of how a parent reacts when he sees his or her three year old reach for the handle of a pan on the stove. She yells, “Don’t ever let me see you do that again! That is dangerous! Never, never, never, reach for a pan on the stove. Do that again and I will punish you severely!” Now, she might have said, “Now, honey, there are times when it is entirely safe and appropriate to reach for the handle of a pan on the stove and, the day will come, of course, when you will be able to discern easily whether it is possible to grab that pan safely, but, for the

moment, given your height, it is wiser for you never to reach for a pan on the stove.” Which message will sink in best?

A little thought reveals what a brilliant pedagogical device the dialectic is. Were the writers of Holy Scripture to attempt to resolve the tensions created by the polarities of truth, were they to attempt synthesis, to reconcile the competing interests of the truth, the result would surely be not the whole truth, but a half truth, not the full force of the truth, but a weakened and muddled mixture, not a sovereign God and a responsible man but a partly sovereign God and a partly responsible man which is nothing like the same thing. Not a person who lives in a spirit of complete dependence upon Jesus Christ and who is scrupulously careful to obey all his commandments, but rather someone who is partly looking to Christ and partly caring to obey, which is not at all the same thing. If any truth were presented to us with all of its qualifications, all of its mitigations, all of the truth that might be counterpoised to it, the truth would die the death of those qualifications and counter-positions in our minds and hearts, at least those truths would that we find least attractive and acceptable.

And this is what I find today. The various approaches being taken to reading and preaching the Word of God today all tend to minimize some important part of the Bible’s message. They keep something precious but at the expense of losing something else of great importance. Our task is to keep everything and lose nothing. But, to do that, we must let the Bible say to us what it says, whatever it says, however it says it, even those parts of that teaching that we don’t find as congenial.

This was Canon Gore’s warning.

“At starting, each of us, according to our disposition, is conscious of liking some books of Scripture better than others. This, however, should lead us to recognize that, in some way, we specially need the teaching that is less attractive to us. We should set ourselves to study what we less like, till that, too, has had its proper effect in moulding our conscience and shaping our character.”

Rabbi Duncan, that eccentric Scottish professor of almost uncanny insight, wants to say something more.

“Preach the antinomies of truth, and carry each out as far as it is possible to carry it. But don’t attempt to reconcile them. These two lines [ / \ ] will meet if produced far enough. But if I try to make them meet, I give one or other of them a twist, and so reduce it from being a straight line. If the stones of an arch were to become animated and speak, the stones on the right hand would say, ‘Right-hand pressure is right pressure;’ and the stones on the left hand would say, ‘left-hand pressure is right pressure;’ but by pressing in opposite directions they keep up the keystone of the arch.”

The brilliantly perceptive philosopher Simone Weil, seems to have come to the same conclusion. When fashioning her method of investigation she likewise came to reject a method that seeks a golden mean between truths and favored instead a dialectic that seeks instead an equilibrium of

truths. “As soon as one has arrived at any position,” she wrote, “try to find in what sense the contrary is true.” In any case, Chesterton was right to say that “Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious.”

Now, we must conclude for this evening. I’ll continue this introduction next Lord’s Day evening, God willing. But, get my point. The danger of the redemptive-historical method of reading and preaching the Bible – for all its virtues, and they are considerable and I have learned a great deal from those men – is that it brings us not to want to hear parts of the Bible that don’t so easily appear to be an account of Christ and his salvation. Redemptive-historical men have a reputation, in fact, for being poor at teaching people how to live the Christian life. They are afraid of turning the faith into moralism. But, the fact is, the Bible is rich with teaching on how to live the Christian life. They do not do so well at teaching us to live our lives in the understanding that they will be brought into judgment on the last day, because that message seems to diminish our entire confidence in what Christ has done for us as our hope of salvation. But, the Bible talks both about our absolute dependence upon Christ and our need to face the fact that we will be judged according to our works on the last day.

Has it ever bothered you, as it has bothered me, that not a one of the last judgment scenes in the Bible reads the way it is supposed to read! We expect the Bible to describe the last judgment this way: The Lord will say, those who have believed in me come stand on my right and hand and those who did not believe in me go to outer darkness. But the Bible never paints the picture that way. It is always, instead, the books will be opened and “each person was judged according to what he had done” (Rev. 20:12-13).

Here is my fear. I don’t think a redemptive-historical man would have ever written the Bible the way it was written. I don’t think he would have preached the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus actually preached it. I don’t think a law-gospel man would ever have allowed James into the New Testament. There is the issue. Are we going to hear the Lord say everything he has to say to us in his Word, or are we going to pick and choose among favored topics? I am convinced that we must take the Bible as it comes to us, with all of this tension in it between teachings that are not easily held together. I am convinced it is a great mistake to attempt to reduce the Bible to a unifying theme, even if that theme is the salvation of Christ, because in our hands that always means, that invariably means, that we are going to hear parts of the Bible and refuse to hear other parts.