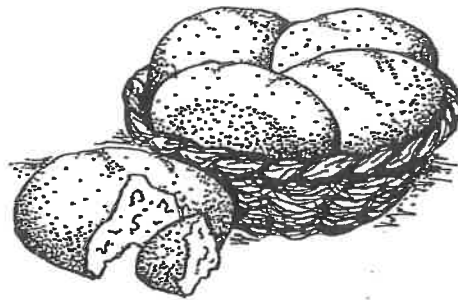


# BREAD FOR LIFE



READING THE BIBLE Theodore Stylianopoulos

## The Bible Is for Every Christian

In the great tradition of the Orthodox Church the Bible is the central source of truth and the most creative factor behind the worship, doctrine and practice of the Church. It is also intended to inspire and strengthen the daily life of the average Christian. St. Cyprian describes the Gospels as four rivers within the Church which water fruitful trees—the faithful. He views the New Testament as a fountain which provides a steady flow of nourishment for the lives of Christian believers. In Orthodox monasticism the Bible is one of the main sources of Orthodox spirituality. St. Basil draws his basic principles of spiritual life for Christians devoted to a life of perfection from the Bible (St. Basil, Epistle 22). The great Fathers of the Church looked upon the Word of God as the primary teacher and guide for life. They viewed the Bible as an ocean of divine mysteries having inexhaustible breadth and astonishing depths to capture our attention, to

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strengthen us in our weaknesses and to fire our souls with zeal of God. Below are some passages on the value of reading the Bible from the teachings of one of the greatest spiritual writers, St. Isaac the Syrian (*Mystical Treatises*):

The foundation of the (true) way of life consists in accustoming the mind to the words of God.

The light of the soul consists in continuous meditation upon the Scriptures. For they trace in the mind profitable recollections . . . (and) perpetual abiding with God, in love and in purity of heart.

As to the foundation of spiritual excellence (or spiritual life), the first among its elements is the concentration on the enlightened Word of the straight and holy ways (that is, the Bible), the Word that by the inspired Psalmist is called the teacher.

The holy occupation of the reading of the Scriptures . . . is a fortification of the mind, a cause of prayer, a helper and a companion of vigils, a light of the mind, a guide on the way, and a seed of manifold inspirations during prayer. It is a check against distraction of the spirit and against occupying itself with idle things. It sows in the soul constant memory of God and of the ways of the Saints who have pleased Him. And it causes the mind to acquire wisdom and spiritual subtlety.

Nothing is so apt to banish lascivious customs of the soul and to restrain inciting memories as the

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burning for the love of the teachings and investigations concerning the meaning of the Words of Scripture. Immersed in delight, after having tasted the wisdom contained in the divine Words, every man will leave the body behind him (and) will also banish from his soul all recollections of the world (because) of the new experiences which reach (the soul) from the sea of mysteries (that is, the Bible).

The hesychast's worship of God is prayer and the reading of the Scriptures . . . meditation on God day and night.

St. John Chrysostom is another great Father who held the truth of Scripture at the center of his life and work. Chrysostom directed himself to ordinary Christians and sought to anchor their lives on the Bible. He saw the Bible as a spiritual weapon to combat the evil one, to struggle against the impulses of the old Adam, and to lift up men's hearts from earth to heaven. His chief pastoral resource was the Bible, especially the New Testament. For many years he held Bible classes two or three times a week to interpret the Scriptures to his flock. In his commentaries, which are the abiding fruit of these classes, he constantly exhorts Christians to be alert and watchful, to show zeal of inquiry and to devote themselves to the study of the Bible. According to him ignorance of the Bible is the main cause of evil

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in the world. Consequently, St. Chrysostom counselled Christians to acquire the books of the New Testament, to read especially the Gospels, and to take the truths of the Bible wholly into themselves for they are medicines for the soul.

In more recent times, Father Kosmas Aitolos, an itinerant preacher-monk and canonized Saint of the Church, urged ordinary Christians to apply themselves to the reading of the Bible. His own ministry, resulting in a significant spiritual awakening in northwestern Greece in the eighteenth century, was significantly inspired by the reading of the Bible. Wherever he went, St. Kosmas counselled the villagers to sit in groups of five or ten and discuss the divine teachings of Scripture, and put them inside their heart so that they might find eternal life.

The impact of the Bible as God's Word is well attested in the Orthodox tradition. Today we need to recover that role of the Bible as a spiritual resource for our daily lives. Each Christian can play a part in this rediscovery of the Bible through prayerful private reading and group study of the Bible. Such rediscovery cannot come about all at once. It will come about as the Bible is used in the life of the Church, and as the power of the Bible touches particular lives in both individual and group

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study. When a Christian takes the Bible in hand and reads it with an attitude of faith and prayer he makes himself and his Church available to God. Such a faithful act is an important part of the spiritual growth and renewal of the entire body of the Church, member by member.

Of course Christian leaders, too, have a vital role to play in this rediscovery of the Bible as a source of spiritual nourishment. Priests and especially bishops as the shepherds of the Church have the chief pastoral authority to guide the whole flock to the spring of life-giving waters. St. Cyprian was a great advocate of the Church and of the episcopacy. Church, episcopacy and Bible were for him closely related. He viewed the entire teaching of the Church, under the leadership of the bishops, as deriving from the New Testament. If we may return to the image of flowing water, here is what St. Cyprian writes about Christian truth, its source, and the role of the bishops:

Imagine that water from an aqueduct, which once flowed abundantly and steadily, suddenly fails. Do we not go to the spring to determine why it stopped flowing? We try to find out whether the water dried up at its source, or whether the water, though still gushing copiously at its source, became diverted en route. If the trouble happens to be a broken or leaky aqueduct, preventing a proper steady flow of

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water, then we repair and reinforce the aqueduct, so that the same steady flow of water from the spring can be provided anew to the city for drinking and other uses. This is what God's bishops who are faithful to His precepts ought to do: if truth has wavered or vacillated in any point, they should return to its source in the Lord, and to the tradition of the Gospels and the Apostles, so that their own conduct may draw its rules from that source from which the doctrine draws its origin.

(Epistle 74,10).

This eloquent statement about the teaching role of the bishops was the common view of the greatest Church Fathers such as St. Irenaios, St. Athanasios, St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom. All of them regarded Holy Scripture, especially the New Testament, as the fountain of truth from which the Church, under the teaching authority and pastoral guidance of the bishops, draws continuous spiritual nourishment for its faithful. The ordained leaders of the Church have an indispensable role to play in the faithful's use of the Bible for daily spiritual growth. By guiding Christians to the books of the Bible, bishops and priests lead the faithful to build up a spiritual bond with the sacred authors, prophets, apostles, evangelists and above all with Christ Himself.

# The Essential Content of the Bible

## God's Word

The Bible has been called the most unique book humankind has ever seen. Actually it is more than a book. It is a whole library. The Old Testament contains forty-nine books written over a period of many centuries prior to the birth of Christ.\* Closely bound to the history of ancient Israel, the Old Testament contains history, law, prophecy, psalms, wisdom and edifying stories. The New Testament includes twenty-seven books written mostly in the first century A.D. The New Testament gives an account of the redeeming life and work of Jesus

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\*Ten of these books, called "deutero-canonical," occupy a lesser authority in the Orthodox Church. They are: Esdras I, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Sirach), Baruch, Maccabees I, II and III, and the Epistle of Jeremiah. Some of these books, such as the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, are much used in Orthodox worship and also provide rich spiritual nourishment for the careful reader. For Protestants these books have no canonical authority at all, but mostly historical value, and are called "Apocrypha."

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(Gospels), the origins and life of the early Church (Acts of the Apostles and Letters), and ends with the awesome Book of Revelation which anticipates God's final victory over evil and the establishment of a new world.

The Bible, therefore, features a rich variety of books, authors and contents. Some of the sacred authors remain anonymous. In certain instances books were produced by a process of compilation, revision, or the merging of several oral or written traditions.

Also, within the Bible, especially the Old Testament, there is a considerable diversity of views. A Christian generally reads the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament. The latter presents a more unified vision centered on Jesus Christ. Thus the Letter to the Hebrews aptly says: "In many and various ways God spoke of old . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed the heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Yet all the authors and books of the Bible have one thing in common: they tell about God's dealings with His people. In various forms and ways they tell about God's love for the world. In varying degrees of clarity they tell about the truths of God which are the basis of all life. It would be superficial to find the Bible's uniqueness in its popularity, its numerous ancient and modern translations, its



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countless editions and its unprecedented circulation. The profound uniqueness of the Bible rests on this: it speaks to human beings about God like no other book in the world. It is God's Word. In more technical theological language, the Bible is God's "revelation." What does this mean? When a reader picks up the Bible, in what sense does such a person come in touch with God's Word or God's "revelation?"

### Record and Revelation

The Orthodox Church has a distinctive view of the Bible that upholds its holiness yet avoids doctrinaire fundamentalism. The Church Fathers saw the Bible as a "Holy Book," an icon full of grace. The Bible was for them not only the record of mighty acts of God for the salvation of the world but also a living source of divine truths which nourished faith, enlivened hope and strengthened Christians in their spiritual struggle. Nevertheless, there emerged in the Orthodox tradition the position that the Bible is the *record* of truth, not the truth itself; the *record* of revelation, not revelation itself. Why is this so? According to the Church Fathers, the truth itself is God alone and revelation itself is disclosure of His personal Being, not a set of ideas or propositions

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about Him. Truth is a personal sharing in the divine life as present reality experienced by patriarchs, prophets, apostles and saints. It is immediate knowledge *of* the living God—personal communion with Him—and not indirect knowledge *about* God through information of what He did with others and through what others have written about Him. The *record* of revealed truths becomes a *living testimony* of actual truths today as the Holy Spirit makes them come alive in the heart of the believer who reads the Bible attentively and prayerfully. Knowledge of truth, as St. Isaac the Syrian writes, is consciousness of grace. It is the Holy Spirit dwelling in the Christian, empowering, and guiding him or her into new insights and experiences of the Christian life.

This distinction between record and truth carries several important implications. First, it safeguards the mystery of God from being identified with the letter of Scripture (biblical literalism or biblicism)—an issue that came to the fore in the Church in its struggle against the Eunomians who falsely claimed that biblical words defined the essence of God. Secondly, it permits the freedom to see in the Bible the experiences of many persons in their relationship with God written in their own language, their own time and circumstances, their own symbols and images, and their own

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ideas about the world. It permits, in other words, a dynamic relationship between the Word of God contained in Scripture which consists of the truths of the Bible, and the words of men, the human forms, in which God's Word is communicated. Thirdly, it presupposes that the Orthodox Church highly esteems also other records of the experience of God, such as the writings of the Church Fathers, the liturgical forms and texts, and the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils. It rescues the Church from an exclusive focus on the Bible. Finally, the acknowledgment of a dynamic relationship between letter and spirit destroys doctrinaire biblical fundamentalism as a theological posture (that is to say the idea that God dictated propositions which were then written down word for word by the sacred authors) and thus guards Orthodox Christian life from the error of idolatrous veneration of the text of Scripture (bibliolatry).

What the distinction between record and truth does not intend, however, is to minimize the importance of the Bible. If the Orthodox Church also esteems other records of the experience of God, the Bible still remains the primary record in the theological tradition and the worship of the Church. The Holy Gospels are always on the Altar Table together with the Sacred Host. The liturgical texts and worship

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services are filled with biblical readings, the language of Scripture, and references to persons, events, and images of the Bible. The main source of patristic theology is Holy Scripture. The most effective tool in Christian education, mission, and spiritual life is Holy Scripture. No other treasure in the tradition of the Church equals the accessibility, value and authority of the Bible. Therefore, the above remarks against biblical fundamentalism do not imply that the Orthodox Church does not take seriously the letter of Scripture. Indeed, letter and spirit are closely connected in the meaning of the Bible. The Orthodox Church maintains a dynamic conservatism with regard to the truth of God as expressed through human words in the Bible. By dynamic conservatism is meant that the plain meaning of Scripture is generally accepted as authoritative but with the awareness that individual parts must be seen in the light of the whole—isolated texts and passages must be read according to what the Church Fathers called the *skopos* (the central aim or overall message) of the Bible.

The Orthodox Church does not have a fundamentalist but it does have a fundamental view of the sanctity and authority of the Bible. While the consensus of the living tradition of the Church—the life in the Holy Spirit as an ongoing, present and personal reality—is the

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final authority and interpretive criterion, still the Bible is the Word of God: to be read, studied and obeyed. Thus St. John Chrysostom frequently urges Christians to obtain Bibles, to read them and to engrave the truths of the Bible on their minds and hearts. For example he writes:

If now we will thus search the Scriptures, exactly and not carelessly, we shall be able to attain to our salvation; if we continually dwell upon them, we shall learn right teaching and a perfect life. . . . For it cannot be that he who speaks with God, and hears God speak, should not profit.

The above is not an isolated view of a single Church Father. It is representative of the consensus of the great Fathers such as St. Athanasios, St. Basil, St. Gregory Nanzianzen and others. For them the Bible is the primary source of God's truth and should be closely heeded by all Christians. St. Basil anchors his whole understanding of spiritual life on the Bible. He writes:

The best way to find what is fitting (for one's life) is the meditation of the divinely inspired Scriptures. For in these are found counsels for our actions, and the lives of blessed men, though transmitted in writing, are put before us, like living images of a godly life, for our imitation of their good works.

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### The Experience of God

What is the essential content at which reading and studying the Bible aim? It is the *experience of God* by patriarchs, prophets, apostles, evangelists and many other less known righteous persons to whom God deigned to reveal Himself in different ways and at various times. Studying the record of their experience of God opens the believer to a similar spiritual experience of God by the grace of the Holy Spirit. What the righteous said or wrote about their life with God becomes a model, a guiding pattern, for the believer's search for personal knowledge of God today. The experience of God by great men of faith and sacred authors in the Bible offers luminous insights in five important areas: a) Who God is; b) who a human being is; c) what life is; d) what God has done for human beings; and e) how each human being should respond—with his or her whole being—to God. The content of the Bible is not merely a collection of different books, nor the accumulation of religious customs and ideas, nor even a treasure chest of profound wisdom illustrating great truths of human life. It is above all a *personal saving relationship*, a mutual relationship of faith and love between man and God, which is expressed through the record of Scripture. The Christian best under-

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stands the Bible when he has in view this relationship of actual persons to God, in which God reveals Himself as a loving Father Who cares about each person as a father cares about his son or daughter.

The purpose of God's personal revelation of Himself is to give life. God reveals Himself as a personal Being Who loves to share His life with persons. The Bible is the record of how God worked in people's lives; how He changed them, how they yielded to Him and became His instruments, or how they refused to yield to Him and received judgment. Scripture should be looked at not simply as a book of ideas but as the record of the personal activity of God—His love, His forgiveness, His healing power, His redeeming judgment, His sanctifying grace and His renewal of life. On man's side the Bible is the story of man's personal need for God, his lostness, his yearning for true life, his rebelliousness and sinfulness, and his incomparable greatness in his intrinsic destiny to be united with God. Study of the Bible therefore aims not merely at historical knowledge but also spiritual content, not only at information but also inspiration, not only at religious wisdom but above all at a personal relationship with God—which changed lives then and continues to change lives now.

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### **The Gospel of Christ**

Seen in this way, the *skopos* (central aim) of the Bible is a saving proclamation. The heart of Scripture is the Gospel: the Good News of what God has done for man. The Bible is not a neutral book. It proclaims God's great redemptive acts and invites a response, not to itself as a sacred book, but to God. The center of God's redemptive work is Jesus Christ. Every page of the Bible either presupposes, anticipates, or proclaims the Good News that God intervened in history to rescue humankind from a distortion of life—fear, guilt, sin, corruption and death which are the tools of demonic powers—and to give abundant life—freedom, wholeness, hope, peace, joy and love. The supreme way by which God renews the world is by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The essential content of the Bible is therefore the Gospel of Christ. The central saving message of the Church from the day of Pentecost has been Christ incarnate, crucified, buried and risen. This is the Gospel which in the words of St. Paul is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). Study of the Bible is true to its subject matter when it concentrates on the Gospel of Christ on which everything else



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rests—Church, sacraments, prayer, priesthood and Christian life. When biblical study seeks the saving message of Jesus Christ in Scripture then the Bible truly becomes that which it is: the Word of God.

Biblical study is therefore Christo-centric. The center of the Bible is Christ. He is "the Way and the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6). In the saving message of the Bible we have the written Word of God. In Christ we have the Word Himself in person. He is the eternal Word of God Who reveals God perfectly. He is the very Word of Life, Who has life from the Father, and gives life. To use the phraseology of St. John, Christ is the Only Begotten Son Who intimately knows the Father and makes Him known to men (John 1:18). He is therefore *the* Teacher and the "Theologian" (Theos-Logos). Christ is everywhere in and behind Scripture. The Gospels directly proclaim His ministry. The Acts of the Apostles record the story of the expansion of His Church and the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. The Epistles give testimony to the mind of Christ expressed in those who write them and to His reign among those who received the Epistles. In the Apocalypse we have the faith and hope of Christ's final victory. In the Old Testament we have the hidden work of Christ Who is revealed to patriarchs and prophets in anticipa-

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tion of His earthly ministry. Thus the whole of Scripture is a kind of sacrament of Christ, in which the eternal Word becomes incarnate and is humbly available to every person through human words. This is the essential content, the precious pearl, of biblical study: Jesus Christ.

