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My profession of faith is simply that I know nothing of a Christ who is presented to us in a human book containing errors, but know only a Christ presented in a divine book, the Bible, which is true from beginning to end. I know nothing of a Christ who possibly was and probably was not born of a virgin, but only a Christ who was truly conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary.

I know nothing of a Christ who possibly did and possibly did not work miracles, but only a Christ who said to the wind and the waves with the voice of the Sovereign Maker and Ruler of all nature, "Peace, be still." I know nothing of a Christ who possibly did and possibly did not die as my substitute on the cross, but know only a Christ who took upon Himself the just punishment of my sins, and died there in my stead to make me right with the holy God.

—J. Gresham Machen

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The Study of the Bible

BIBLE STUDY

The Substance of an Address Delivered to
the Westminster Bible Circle on January 9, 1945

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I TAKE it for granted that we all believe the Bible to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. I take it for granted that we all read the Bible with regularity. What I am going to plead for, however, is concentrated, sustained, devoted study of the Bible, the kind of study that is not fulfilled by the perfunctory reading of some passages each day. The set periods of family worship are not, of course, by any means to be disparaged. This is a highly necessary and most fruitful exercise. The influence for good exerted by honoring God's Word in this way is incalculable for all concerned. Indeed, the minimal use of the Bible in this way has often left an indelible impression for good. And furthermore, the set periods of family worship may become the occasions for very concentrated and systematic study of the Bible.

But what I am going to stress is the necessity for diligent and persevering searching of the Scriptures, study whereby we shall turn and turn again the pages of Scripture, the study of prolonged thought and meditation by which our hearts and minds may become soaked with the truth of the Bible and by which the deepest springs of thought, feeling and action may be stirred and directed, the study by which the Word of God will grip us, bind us, hold us, pull us, drive us, raise us up from the dunghill, bring us down from our high conceits and make us its bondservants in all of thought, life and conduct.

The Word of God is a great deep; the commandment is exceeding broad; and so we cannot by merely occasional, hurried and perfunctory use of it understand its meaning and power.

Sustained and diligent study of the Bible is indispensable for several reasons. I am going to mention three of these.

I. The Bible is God's Word, the revealed counsel of God. It is possible for us to develop a certain kind of familiarity with the Bible so that we fail to appreciate the marvel of God's favor and mercy and wisdom in giving

it to us. We need to stop and consider what hopeless darkness, misery and confusion would be ours if we did not possess the Bible—we would be without God and without hope in the world, endlessly stumbling over our own vain imaginings with respect to God, with respect to His will for us and with respect to our own nature, origin and destiny. The Bible is the infallible revelation to us of the truth regarding God Himself, regarding the world in which we live and regarding ourselves. It reveals God's mind and will for us; it declares the way of salvation; it discloses the knowledge that is eternal life. The secrets of God's mind and purpose, secrets which eye hath not seen nor ear heard, have been laid open to us, the things that concern God's glory, and our highest interests against all the issues of life and death, of time and eternity.

If Winston Churchill wrote a book disclosing to us in his own masterly style a great many of the secrets with respect to this war, secrets which for various reasons must now be concealed, I suppose that we would all be impatient until we should be able to read it. Very likely we would devour its contents. But how trivial in comparison are the secrets hidden in Churchill's mind! The eternal God, of whose plan all history is the unfolding, has let us in on the secrets of His mind and purpose. The mystery hid from ages and generations, the things which prophets and righteous men desired to see but did not see, God has revealed to us upon whom the ends of the ages have come. He has not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth. His will is made known to all nations for the obedience of faith.

If we truly appreciate the mystery of God's grace and wisdom, we shall study the Bible as one who has found great spoil. The very nature and content of the Bible as God's Word will compel our most earnest application to it.

II. We must study the Bible with all diligence and persistence if we are really to know and understand its

truth. It is perfectly true and an unspeakable mercy that a certain simplicity characterizes the Bible. We cannot read it with some measure of intelligent attention without getting its great central message. The things necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation are clearly propounded in Scripture, and he that runs may read. But no Christian should be satisfied with the bare minimum of knowledge necessary for salvation. It is, indeed, to be lamented that the life of many earnest Christians is based upon a fragmentary, piecemeal knowledge of Scripture teaching. Their knowledge is what may be called "block-knowledge," consisting of a series of rather loosely related and disconnected items, and in their thinking these items are not brought into any coherent or coordinated relation to one another.

The Bible revelation should never be compared to a pile of blocks, even should we think of these as blocks of the finest granite, well-shaped and masterfully hewn, arranged in the most symmetrical order. The Bible is an organism; its unity is organic. It is not a compilation of isolated and unrelated divine oracles. The Bible is something that grew over a period of some fifteen centuries. It grew by a process of divine revelation and inspiration. At sundry times and in divers manners God progressively revealed Himself and His will until in the fullness of time God sent forth His Son who is the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.

Our knowledge of the Bible, if it is to be really adequate, must be knowledge of the Bible as it is and must reflect this organic character, not knowledge of the piecemeal or block variety but knowledge of the vital organic unity that belongs to the Bible. We must understand that the whole Bible stands together and that the fibres of organic connection run through the whole Bible connecting one part with every other part and every one truth with every other truth.

When we appreciate this feature of Scripture and as we engage in concentrated study of one passage, our minds will course back and forth through the whole Bible along the lines which connect that passage with the rest of Scripture, lines which illumine for us the meaning of that particular passage and show the closely-knit organic unity of the whole of Scripture. It is in this way that the Bible will consist for us not in a string of texts to be used simply at random and on what we deem the appropriate occasions, but rather in an organic unit that throbs with life. Each detail of our knowledge and faith will find its place in a body of knowledge that has the same coherent, systematic and closely organized character. What might appear to us to be rather incidental and unimportant details will, on sounder and more intelligent reflection, become replete with meaning. Genesis 50:1, for example, will not be simply an incident to be read and slurred over. There we read that when Jacob died "Joseph fell upon his father's face, and wept upon him, and kissed him." It might appear that this is but an interesting example of oriental sentimentalism, scarcely worthy of the maturity and restraint that should characterize strong and self-controlled men. Indeed, there are people who think that it is not a mark of Christian grace to show sorrow and tears at the death of our loved ones. They would aver that Christian character will be emotionally unmoved in such situations. Well, such an attitude may be magnificent stoicism but it is not Christianity. When we read Genesis 50:1 with true insight, we shall see that it is in line with the example of our Lord when He wept at the grave of Lazarus and in line with the devout emotion of the New Testament saints. "And devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him" (Acts 8:2). Joseph's conduct now was in complete harmony with that virile integrity and competence of which his whole life is so conspicuous an example.

III. Painsstaking study of the Bible is indispensable to our own thought and practice. Life is very complex and we are constantly beset with baffling questions. New situations daily confront us. If the situations are not entirely new, old situations take on new color and new settings. We need to

know anew what is the right thing to think and what is the right thing to do. If we are to meet these situations, we must be armed with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, and we must be equipped with such knowledge of the Word that we shall derive from it the needed direction and strength.

Indolence is one of our greatest temptations. We are in constant danger of becoming static in our thinking. Perhaps we have a well-rounded and competent knowledge of the Christian faith. Perhaps we have learned the Shorter Catechism or the Heidelberg Catechism. Perchance we have digested some good textbook in theology. All of this is excellent. I know of no compendium of Christian truth that is more excellent than the Shorter Catechism, and what an inestimable reservoir of truth we possess if our memories are stored with and our minds established in the masterly definitions of that treasure of Christian literature. The blessings for the kingdom of God accruing from such catechetical knowledge are incalculable, and the day of judgment alone will declare them all. We do well to peruse our great catechisms and creeds and textbooks and not be carried away by the pedagogical mush to which we are in these days subjected.

But if we rely upon such a reservoir of knowledge we are in a dangerous and slippery position. Thought and life are too complex to be adequately met by any such reservoir. The means God has provided for every exigency that may arise is the Word of God itself. The demand of the multiform situations in which we are placed in our thinking and in our life are met only by the multiform wisdom deposited in the holy Scriptures. However much assistance we may derive from formulations and expositions of Scripture truth—and it is not only impoverishing but God-dishonoring to disparage and neglect these—yet, after all, the Bible is the only sufficient rule of faith and life as well as the only infallible rule. We must betake ourselves anew, day by day, with humble and submissive minds to the law and to the testimony so that our minds may be illumined, replenished, refreshed, renewed and reinvigorated by the pure light that shines in the pages of God's inerrant Word. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom."

We may be loyal to a certain tradition, let us even say a good tradition, and yet be quite petrified and superstitious in our loyalty, if we have no higher norm or appeal than the traditions of the fathers. Our devotion to a tradition is wholesome only when we recognize in that tradition, not the authority of the fathers, but the authority of God's Word. Apart from the recognition of divine authority, all our religious devotion is abomination in the sight of God. It is to the Thessalonians that Paul wrote, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." And we can find added meaning in the exhortation when we read of the Bereans that they were "more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). Hence the necessity of constant grounding of our convictions, of our devotion and of our conduct in the Word of God.

It was Jesus who said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). The truth is the perfect law of liberty and God's Word is truth. It might seem to us that law and liberty are incoherent. For law binds and liberty makes free. But if we know anything of God's way we know that the free men of Christ Jesus are the bond-servants of Christ. The liberty wherewith Christ makes His people free is the freedom that is constituted by and consists in bondservice to God's Word.

In all our study and application of the Word of God, we must appreciate a divinely-fixed coördination. It is that of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." God has not left us to our own resources in the study of His Word. There is the never-failing promise and the ever-present ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is the author of the Word and it is His peculiar prerogative to illumine the Scripture and to seal its truth upon our hearts. These are the two pillars of faith and life—the whole organism of Scripture revelation and the promise of the Spirit to guide us into all the truth. The Spirit honors and seals His own Word and the Word assures us that "if ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"