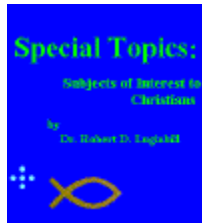


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Read Your Bible: Protection against Cults

A Basic Christian Right and Responsibility

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This site, ichthys.com, is a ministry devoted to Christian spiritual growth. All visitors are more than welcome to make personal (not for profit) use of any of the Bible study materials contained on these pages. There is, however, one *very important principle* that should be accepted as an essential prerequisite to any directed Bible study such as this site provides. It is a principle that must be adhered to in order to assure your spiritual growth and spiritual safety:

Christians should read the Bible for themselves every day without fail!

The Example of the Bereans:

Now the [Bereans] were more honorable in character than the people of Thessalonika, for they received the Word with great enthusiasm, while examining the scriptures for verification of what [they were being taught].

Acts 17:11

Rather than criticizing these early believers for "checking out" the veracity of what had been taught to them by the apostle Paul, this verse actually praises them for doing so. And while it is clear from the Greek text that the Bereans are being applauded here primarily for their enthusiastic acceptance of the Gospel, this verse *also* - so far from *condemning* them for a lack of trust - actually *commends* them for their action. This verse plainly approves the practice of taking the time and interest to ***consult the scriptures*** in order to establish the veracity of what is being taught. We find this to be a most reasonable approach, for:

If what is taught is really true, then the scriptures will clearly confirm it.

It is true that taking advantage of accurate Bible teaching *is* an important part of the believer's spiritual growth. Indeed, that is the whole point of this ministry. Furthermore, the provision of Bible teaching is an undisputed ministry of God the Holy Spirit (Eph.4:11-16). At the same time, however, it is the ***responsibility of the listener to compare*** what is being taught with the Bible. To be sure, this should be done in a spirit of humility (as the Bereans demonstrated), but *it should be done*. No one who teaches the Bible should have a problem with this, for such a procedure is really *the only way to keep everyone honest*. As believers in Jesus Christ, we must ultimately place our faith in God and in the Word of God - Jesus, the living Word, and in the Bible, the written Word - *not* in man's words.

Ideally, there will be no conflict between what your teacher teaches and what you read in the Bible as you check out the scripture references given to support a principle or doctrine. It is also true that there are many non-sinister reasons why you may feel there is some discrepancy between what is taught and what you read, and no one is advocating that you part company on the basis of minor discrepancies. At the same time, however, if, as you continue with the daily reading of your Bible, the "warning bells" begin to go off too frequently and too loudly, it is in the interest of your spiritual safety that you not ignore them. The apostle Paul even goes so far as to extend this warning to himself, establishing the principle that no track-record, even one as illustrious as his, exempts believers from continuing to apply the test of scripture to all Bible teaching:

But if I myself - or even an angel out of heaven - should preach to you something out of keeping with what I have preached to you, let him be cursed!
Galatians 1:8-9

Believers have the responsibility to place what the Bible says over what people (even well-intentioned and respected people) may say. Now this principle is impossible to fulfill *without reading your Bible regularly*. As believers, we are to "evaluate everything" (1Thes.5:21), "test the spirits, to see whether or not they are from God" (1Jn.4:1), and "assess" teaching and prophecy (1Cor.14:29). But how are we to do this without prior information? The fulfillment of these commands is impossible without a deep, solid grounding in the Bible itself.

☑ ***The Bible is the touchstone with which we must evaluate the truth.***

And it is not just appropriate passages which must be taken into consideration. We need to have a broad understanding and feel for the entire canon of scripture, its whole woof and warp. As in the famous riddle of the blind men and the elephant, if we only have a limited view of all that is actually in the Bible, our judgment is bound to be distorted. It takes disciplined, regular reading of *all* the Holy scriptures in combination with doctrinally accurate teaching to provide maximum protection from false teaching:

Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, until we all reach that

unifying goal of believing what is right and of giving our complete allegiance to the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity whose "attainment" is defined by Christ; that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, but rather that we may, **by embracing the truth** in love, grow up in all respects, with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

The Christ Test: What source of truth do we have, if not the Bible? How do we expect to be led to Jesus Christ, if not through the Holy Scripture? As the apostle Paul makes clear in the passage quoted above from the epistle to the Ephesians, the point of "embracing the truth" is twofold: 1) to avoid being taken in by false teaching, and 2) to develop a stronger relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. To put it simply, false teaching leads **away from** Christ, correct teaching leads **toward** Christ. This, then, is essentially how the believer must discern whether the teaching in question is correct or false. All teaching must pass the "Christ test".

Any spirit [i.e. person, teaching, organization] which professes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, but any spirit which does not profess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God.

1John 4:2

That is to say, all correct teaching must start with this proposition, a proposition that includes and is based on the following corollaries, **all or some of which false teaching inevitably denies:**

- *that Jesus Christ is both undiminished deity and true humanity.* [Rom.9:5; Col.2:9; 1Jn.5:6-12]
- *that He came into the world to die for all mankind.* [Jn.3:16; 1Pet.2:24]
- *that His work was deemed acceptable by the Father.* [Rom.3:21-26]
- *that we are saved on the basis of our faith in Him and in His work alone (and not by our own works).* [Eph.2:8-9]
- *that apart from faith in Jesus Christ, there is no way to approach the Father.* [Jn.14:6]
- *that the true believer in Jesus Christ follows Christ and His teachings throughout his life on this earth.* [Matt.7:20; 1Jn.2:4]

This last point brings us back full-circle to the issue of reading our Bibles everyday. If we

are to follow Christ and His teachings, we must learn about Him and about them. Our indoctrination or "discipleship" in the truth must thus come from two sources: 1) reading the Bible for ourselves, and 2) accepting the authority of legitimate, prepared Bible teachers. But even (and perhaps especially) in regard to this second source for learning about Christ and His teachings, all correct teaching is ultimately and fundamentally derived **from the Bible**. But how are we, as believers, to evaluate the correctness of what we are taught unless we make it a daily habit to go to the source of truth itself, for ourselves?

Let no one say, moreover, whether teacher or lay, that he or she *follows Christ, not the Bible*. For such a thing is an impossibility, and such a statement, therefore, a dangerous lie. How could it be otherwise? For just as Jesus Christ is the living reflection of the complete, luminescent truth of God, so the Holy Scriptures are the concrete expression of the person and the mind of Jesus Christ, given to us His saints that we might learn and know that truth:

- The Bible is God's Word:

For the Word of God is living and powerful; it is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the point of being able to divide the spirit from its earthly life and the marrow from its bones; it acts as a judge of our heart's intentions and emotions.
Hebrews 4:12

- The Bible, God's Word, is divinely inspired by Him:

All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for admonishing, for correcting, and for training in righteousness.
2nd Timothy 3:16

- The written Word of God is God's truth and carries God's authority:

Search the scriptures (since you assume by how you read them that you have eternal life)! These are the very scriptures that bear testimony about Me.
John 5:39

- Jesus Christ is **both** the truth **and** the living Word of God:

I am the way, the truth and the life.
John 14:6

What we have seen from the beginning, what we have heard and seen with our eyes, what we have observed and touched with our hands - this is about the Word of life [i.e. Jesus Christ].
1st John 1:1

- The written Word manifests Jesus Christ, the Living Word (through the Holy Spirit):

For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he might instruct Him? But we possess the very mind of Christ [i.e. the Holy Spirit illuminating the scriptures which are Christ's very thinking].

1st Corinthians 2:16 (cf. v.12-13)

- Therefore the Bible is the only sure witness to Christ:

For I did not follow concocted tales in making known to you the power and the coming return of our Lord, Jesus Christ, but was an eyewitness to His majesty. For when He had received honor and glory from God the Father, these words sounded forth to Him from God's majestic glory: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased." And these words I myself heard as they were delivered from heaven, for I was with Him on the holy mountain [cf. Matt.17:1-8]. Yet I consider the prophetically inspired Word [i.e. the Bible] even more reliable [i.e. than what I saw with my own eyes]. You too would do well to pay the closest attention to this [prophetically inspired Word], just as to a lamp shining in a dark place [cf. Ps.119:105], until the day dawns, and the Morning Star rises [i.e. Christ returns], pondering in your hearts this principle of prime importance: no single verse of prophetically inspired scripture has ever come into being as a result of personal reflection. For true prophecy has never occurred by human will, but only when holy men of God have spoken under the direction and agency of the Holy Spirit.

2nd Peter 1:16-21

The Bible itself, not the writings or teachings of any man or organization, not the supposed eyewitness accounts of any third party, nor any vision, dream, prophecy or any other possible source of information, ***is the only proper standard of faith and practice for those who purport to be followers of Jesus Christ.***

Checklist of Excuses for not Reading your Bible:

You probably have a telephone. You probably talk on it most days.

But do you read your Bible every day?

You probably have a radio. You probably listen to it most days.

But do you read your Bible every day?

You probably have a television. You probably watch it most days.

But do you read your Bible every day?

You probably take a newspaper. You probably read it most days.

But do you read your Bible every day?

We live in a world filled with modern conveniences such as the ones mentioned above. It is perhaps ironic that they make such heavy demands on our time and attention at the same time that they grant us opportunities unavailable to former ages. Yet despite the disadvantages of the modern world and the demonstrably negative side of technology, it is beyond argument that we have at least one important advantage that believers in the first century lacked: the general availability of the Bible.

Maybe in the ancient world they had an excuse or two:

- *Cost:* A complete copy of the scriptures was well beyond the ability of the average person to afford in a lifetime. This was partially because of the extreme cost of materials (especially in the case of vellum; believers occasionally scribbled favorite verses on potsherds as a way to have some small portion of scripture for themselves).
- *Time:* The printing press is a comparatively modern invention, and in the days following the ministries of the apostles, any new copy of the Bible (or portion thereof) would have to be painstakingly produced by hand, one letter at a time. Moreover, with the ancient pen and ink, copying by hand was far more difficult than it would be today, and took much longer, requiring, for all intents and purposes, a professional.
- *Canon:* The entire canon of the New Testament scriptures took some time to be collected in its entirety, and so all the books of the Bible were not immediately available, even to the rare individual with extensive resources.
- *Literacy:* Even if one had access to a copy of the Bible, literacy was not universal and could certainly not be taken for granted (especially among slaves and freedmen who formed a large segment of the early believers). Even for those who did have some education in Greek, reading was more laborious than today. Script was less legible and scrolls were cumbersome, making reading more of a chore (the codex or book form being invented only later).
- *Translation:* What if your language was not Greek? It took time for the Bible to be disseminated and translated into contemporary languages (like Latin, Syriac and Armenian). And we know from the remains of the ancient versions that the accuracy of the exemplar (copy text) and of the translations themselves was no small issue. Even if your native language was Greek, you still had to make use of a translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint), a Greek version of the Hebrew and Aramaic original that often diverges radically from its archetype.
- *Accuracy:* Today, when we read from one of the standard versions of the Bible, we can check the introduction and see that with few exceptions the translation has been made by a large group of highly qualified individuals, working from textual exemplars that exhibit a very high degree of accuracy. In the ancient world, you would have to take what you could get (and some manuscripts, as well as versions, had serious problems).

But despite facing obstacles and disadvantages we seldom consider, these early Christians were extremely thirsty for the scriptures. Such was their desire for the Word that in spite of Rome's organized persecution and destruction of copies of the Bible, a

wealth of manuscripts, papyri and other witnesses to the text of the Bible have survived from antiquity. In fact, the Bible is by far the best preserved and most substantially witnessed and documented text to have come down to us from the ancient world. What are our excuses in the face of such an example?

- *But I get that at church.*

One of the ways the early Christians compensated for their lack of personal copies of the scriptures was to read extensively from the Bible as part of the church service. "Devote yourself to reading", Paul tells his young protegee Timothy (1Tim.4:13), and it was not uncommon for early congregations to hear the **entire Bible** read through in the course of each year. *This is not the normal practice today precisely because we have our own copies of the scriptures.*

- *But I've already read it.*

There are those around world who are too poor to own a copy of the Bible. If you didn't have it on your shelf, my guess is that you'd soon discover just how precious the Word of God is to you. You would then give much indeed to be able to read it again, and again.

- *I find it hard to understand sometimes.*

There are those around the world still today who are illiterate and unable to read the Bible for themselves at all. There are others whose political circumstances make it difficult to have access to teaching and other resources that might help to explain the scriptures (believers in China, for example). We who have access to myriad opportunities for Bible teaching and unlimited access to books about the Bible should recognize our blessings on this score, trusting God and praying to Him to lead us into understanding (and the legitimate activities that bring it).

- *I'm just too busy to read it.*

There are those around the world who are being persecuted for their Christian faith and prevented from studying the Bible as they would like (in the Sudan, for example). Given our relative advantages, we should make the time to learn about God and His love for us. If we don't make a habit of taking time out to read the Bible, in what way are we fulfilling the Lord's command to "stay on the alert" (Matt.25:13)? Without keeping our minds close on the scriptures, we run the risk of being open to the dangers of false doctrine and deception.

Ignorance of the Bible = Recipe for a Cult: At the end of the age, a massive falling away from the Christian faith will occur (the Great Apostasy: Matt.24:12; 2Thes.2:3), and at that time, many Christians will be taken in by false and non-Biblical teaching (1Tim.4:1ff.; 2Tim.3:1ff.; 2Pet.2:1ff.). But it is not only at that undetermined future time when it will be important for believers to have a firm grasp of the scriptures and the principles of truth they contain.

Ignorance of what the Bible really says has played a large role in making many Christians vulnerable to the teachings and the tactics of the ever dangerous and ever

more numerous cults. Successful cults are always highly proficient at "mind control" techniques, and while most of us feel that we are impervious to such things, there are enough case studies to show that relentless group pressure preying upon our most basic fears, guilt and needs can be extremely effective. Such pressure can cause even the most self-confident of people to surrender their will. As Christians, we are most vulnerable to groups that style themselves as Christians (the wolves in sheep's clothing of Matt.7:15). Cult leaders of this sort are very good at appearing to be "angels of light", when in reality they are agents of the devil (2Cor.11:14). Our first line of defense against such persons and organizations must be the Bible, ***for it is with the Bible that they will attempt to win us over.*** So beware of any person or group that:

- downplays the importance of reading the Bible for yourself.
- wants to supervise or take control of your reading of the Bible.
- suggests you read only their "special version" of the Bible (other version are "wrong").
- tells you not to read the Bible for yourself at all.

Cult Characteristics: From the cults' point of view, the Bible is a dangerous weapon in your hands, because if it is read with even the tiniest bit of openness of mind, it will eventually contradict their tenets. Cults inevitably share certain common characteristics that a firm grounding in scripture will condemn every time. But for those whose grasp of scripture is less than adequate, cult doctrine and cult methodology is frequently effective. While often proclaiming the Bible and Christianity at first, cults are in fact anti-Bible and anti-Christian. Despite their disparate origin, cults have nearly identical essential characteristics, as might be expected when we take into account that they are all at their base dedicated to furthering Satan's plan. We are reminded of the similarity of the devil's *original* anti-Biblical ploy when we examine these *four basic cult characteristics*. Cults almost always profess:

1. A Separate Society:

Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden?"
Genesis 3:1

In Genesis chapter three we find Eve alone in the garden conversing, strange as it may seem, with a snake. Perhaps the novelty of a talking creature should have set off some warning bells for her, but we should not be too surprised at the lapse of judgment. Failing to pay attention to God and His Word makes us all vulnerable to lies. The oddity of the source of the lie (cult members with bizarre ways are the most common today) is easily overcome by the devil when there is no barrier of truth to block the way. Notice in the passage above that the serpent began his attack by twisting the truth (God had actually only forbidden eating from the tree of knowledge). The devil often starts his attack by misquoting God's truth. Perverting the truth is an important first step for cult

evangelists, because getting people to accept distortions of the truth is a good way to start divorcing them from the reality they know. This, in turn, makes them increasingly dependent upon the new leader and the new society into which they are being initiated, a separate society that will ultimately alienate them from the normality of their past, until finally they become completely dependent upon their new masters. The new, "separate" society to which the cult victim now belongs thrives upon isolation from the real world, and not only because the light of truth and reality expose the lies upon which it is based: ***cults draw their main strength from separating and isolating their members from normal society.***

Once the resistance of Biblical truth is overcome, it is a central part of cult strategy to ***isolate*** their victims and new recruits from their friends, family members, support systems and from the normal world in general. ***Isolation*** of the new recruit is achieved by:

- ***Intolerant Dogmatism:*** Beware of groups who claim to have a monopoly on the truth, and who will not tolerate any deviation from their doctrines or any discussion of their tenets. People who are positively certain of the truth of what they say do have a definite appeal, but their certainty and dogmatism do not necessarily make what they say true. The cult will often put the matter to the potential recruit in this way: They are the "only ones" with the truth and it can't be found anywhere else - this is your "last chance" to be saved, and if you don't grab it, then you're off to hell (a version of pressure salesmanship that is all too often effective). Within the cult, there is no real seeking of truth, however, - they've already found it! But somehow you can't get to this truth of theirs immediately, you can't examine it or test it (all things will be revealed to you "later"). And if you dare to question or challenge the dogma, you become the enemy. These tactics are *isolating*, because they force the initiate to "go along in order to get along". And it won't be long until he's surrendered his will.
- ***Odd Customs:*** Beware of groups that sport unusual dress, exhibit strange behavior, and affect an odd vocabulary or manner of speaking (including chants, for example). Besides appearing exotic and therefore strangely intriguing to some potential members, these patterns of behavior serve another important function in the strategy of the cult: they serve *to isolate* the individual from the rest of society which does not dress, act or speak in the same way. As the new recruit begins to adopt the manners of the cult, people start to shun him (or at least keep their distance). Now the other members (who dress, act and talk as he has begun too) are the only ones like him and the only ones who fully accept him, and the process of isolation moves forward.
- ***Emotional Excess:*** Beware of any emphasis on feelings over facts. Cults are masters at using feelings of loneliness, guilt, inadequacy - even an honest desire for truth and self-improvement - as levers to pry the potential recruit out of his normal environment. Experiencing emotional turmoil does not mean that those who have managed to bring it to the surface are therefore honest, or righteous or in possession of the truth. It only means that they are skilled at emotional manipulation. In the same way, the expression of emotion in an effusive or excessive way does not necessarily mean that one has found the truth or the "right way". Displays of emotional ecstasy, besides being enjoyed by many people, and tending to reinforce the sense that they

"have found the truth", have this additional effect: they tend to *isolate* the person from main-stream society, as friends, acquaintances and sometimes even family have a tendency to withdraw from these extremes of behavior which they understandably consider bizarre.

- *Physical Separation:* Beware of any group that demands you sell your possessions and move to another state. This may seem laughably obvious, but it is amazing how many people have succumbed to cult tactics to the point of embarking upon just such tragic courses of action. Certainly, this is not usually the first step of cult-indoctrination, but many poor souls are brought to this point with much greater alacrity than we or they would have imagined. When one is not standing firm upon the rock of truth, when one does not put what the Bible says above what man says, then it is not a far stretch to see that the cult leader (or leadership) and his word can easily become "the truth" in the mind of the cult victim. The process often starts with the leader demanding that he approve the new follower's decisions (even the most minute ones), until the time comes when almost all independent decision-making has been done away with. **Once a person has been spiritually isolated** (from the truth of scripture), it is no great task to isolate him emotionally, and, eventually, effect a complete physical isolation from family, friends, and the world he once knew.

*When we lose our anchor of truth - **what God says to us in the Bible** - it is inevitable that we will drift into other currents of influence, the end of which may possibly be the shipwreck of our souls in a separate society whose end and intent is evil (1Tim.1:19; Heb.2:1).*

2. A Self-Righteousness:

"You will surely not die," the serpent said to the woman.
Genesis 3:4

A central part of cult doctrine concerns the issue of God's judgment upon sin and sinners. The immutable righteousness of God and the inevitability of judgment is an indispensable part of the gospel (cf. Acts 10:42; 24:25), because it explains why Christ had to die in our place (to satisfy, or propitiate God's character: Rom.3:22-26). As Christians, we are saved *from* the judgment due our sins by relying on Christ and His work on our behalf. To deny that there is a final judgment (and no hell), is, in effect, to deny that God is a just God (He can overlook sin if He chooses, would be the implication). It is also to deny that mankind has any need for a savior (if sin can be dismissed so easily). God is a loving God and a forgiving God, but His forgiveness is based upon Christ's payment of the penalty for our sins. To reject this aspect of the gospel is to reject the gospel itself. Cults that promise righteousness and eternal life apart from belief in Christ are essentially denying the existence of a truly righteous God, just as the serpent did when he called God a liar in the passage above. To attain eternal life (or whatever their equivalent may be) anti-biblical groups universally substitute some system of self-righteousness. Their version of heaven or paradise can only be achieved through an onerous system of works (rituals, good deeds, self-sacrifice, etc.),

works that are ultimately an insult to God who offered His Son that we might possess true righteousness by faith in Him (Rom.4).

3. A Secret Doctrine:

"For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened."
Genesis 3:5a

It is a common quirk of our human nature that the prospect of knowing something few others do is a tempting one. I think we can all appreciate the effectiveness of Satan's temptation of Eve. He promised her what all cults promise their prospects: initiation into the mysteries of the universe, the "secret doctrines" available only to the select, enlightened few. This aspect of cult modus operandi was known in antiquity as Gnosticism, a movement that claimed possession of such secret knowledge was the means of attaining spirituality and spiritual advancement. Some of their specific doctrines have come down to us (see Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*) and seem like so much gibberish on the printed page. But we would do well to remember that cult doctrines are also manifestly ridiculous when viewed from a safe and sanitary academic perspective. For the potential cult victim, the hidden and forbidden nature of the secret doctrines enhances the temptation, as does the committed and dogmatic adherence of the society of "believers" who are doling them out to him cautiously and selectively. In such carefully constructed situations, the very dogmatism of the cult members can impress and command allegiance. The problem, of course, is that cults possess dogmatism, but without the authority of the truth, and always without documentation. The Bible doesn't change, and can be read and checked "to see if these things are so". Cult doctrine, on the other hand, so far from being open to scrutiny, is almost always changeable as well, since it is open to the interpretation of and often fresh "revelation" from the leader or leadership. The Bible, being the very Word of God, is the authority for Biblical Christianity, not any single person or group of people or their writings or "visions". If it really is the Bible that is being taught, this can be checked, this can be verified. Cult religions, on the other hand, can never be pinned down, and the evil systems which promise to "open the eyes" of their converts really only intend to blind them.

4. A Substitute for God:

"and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."
Genesis 3:5b

The Hebrew word for God in Genesis 3:5b here is *Elohim*, a plural of majesty of the word *El*, meaning "mighty one" or "god". *Elohim* is the most common word in the Hebrew Bible for God, and stresses the preeminence of our God as well as the plurality of persons (three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in His single, unique essence. Occasionally, however, *Elohim* is used as a true plural for "gods" (as in the gods of the heathen nations: Ex.20:3), and it is likely that Satan's implication here is even stronger than the translation suggests: *you will be like gods*. To be like God, or even to *become* a god or a god-like being seems a fairly unbelievable offer to make, yet the offer to Eve was just the first and not the only time that Satan has used this ploy. There are a number

of groups operating in the United States today which really do make this promise in no uncertain terms - not, it is true, to non-members whose pliability has not yet been determined, but eventually, as the victim is sucked deeper and deeper into their vortex. Analogous to being promised divine status is the relatively new twist of becoming part of an extra-terrestrial civilization. And occasionally, the transcendence of humanity by evolving consciousness is promised. But whatever form "becoming like gods" takes, implicit in such an ambition is the effective **replacement or supplanting** of God. For if man can become God's equal in every way, then, of course, God would no longer be God relative to the new "man-god". It would be hard to find a single page of the Bible that would not contradict (in tone or in text) such a blasphemous notion, and even the basic common sense the natural man is born with cries out against such an unbelievable claim (Rom.2:1-16). Yet Eve has not been alone in succumbing to the temptation. Nor was she the first in the realm of creatures to lust after such an impossible object, for the desire to be "like God" and ultimately to replace Him is the arrogant essence of the sin that corrupted the heart of Satan (Is.14:12-15; Ezek.28:12-19). Therefore in this final point, we see a principal that we have been building up to from the start: cults and anti-Biblical religions are always, in their starkest fundamentals, embodiments of Satan's essential philosophy, of his essential religion: at its base all false religion is idolatry and standing behind the idol, craving our worship, is the devil. After all, if you are not worshipping the one, true God, who are you worshipping? Christ said, "He who is not with Me is against Me (Matt.12:30)," and He said this while responding to those who were accusing Him of using the devil's help to cast out demons. Satan, Paul tells us, masquerades as an angel of light (2Cor.11:14), and what, after all, would the devil wish to be called by his worshipers if not God? If he must falsely promise a share of divinity to his potential prey, why not? Was he not so bold as to even offer our Lord all the kingdoms of this world, an offer he would not and could not honor in any case (Matt.4:9)? Examination of the idolatrous religions of antiquity yields similar results. At the top of the pantheon is almost always a bright, shining "sky-god" (e.g. Jupiter) who has replaced an older "crooked" god (e.g. Chronos). It is easy to promise goodness, light, knowledge, brotherhood, no judgment and no judgmental condemnation of wrong, but behind such cult systems past and present is a dark and sinister reality. Instead of sharing in divinity and becoming God, those who wed themselves to such evil only succeed in becoming the servants of a condemned creature of the true God, and ultimately sharing in his condemnation:

For by giving voice to unparalleled folly, they entrap by fleshly lusts and sensuality those who did not flee far enough from such habitual deceivers. For though they promise freedom to others, they themselves are slaves to corruption: by what one is mastered, to this he is enslaved.

2nd Peter 2:18-19

So why do people begin to follow cults? Often it is because they are given the sense that they are missing out on "the truth" (an impression which organized, apparently righteous and blissful cult members are practiced at creating). In fact, it takes a very, very strong and solid grasp of what the Bible actually says to resist cults on their own ground when operating according to their own tactics. "Wolves in sheep's clothing" are indeed plentiful in our day. They may *seem* nice, and even spiritual at first, but the end result of believing their lies instead of the Bible leads only to spiritual disaster. Just as

when David, wandering on the roof of his palace when he should have gone forth with the army, caught a glimpse of Bathsheba and was immediately headed for trouble (2Sam.11), so when we are not where we are supposed to be (i.e. in the scriptures), we too are apt to be vulnerable to the siren songs of the cults.

Reading Your Bible:

1. *Read and Re-Read:* The main point is just to get to actually reading your Bible for yourself on a regular basis. The more you read it, especially the more you read it again and again, the more good things start to happen. You find yourself becoming familiar with the contents, the themes, the tone. More and more you discover links between the ideas and teachings scattered throughout this complex and wonderful book of books; more and more of your questions are answered as you build a framework of Bible knowledge that acts to solidify and intensify any accurate Bible teaching you receive (while also providing a hedge against false doctrines and teachings). The more you read it, the more everything begins to make sense. The principles of truth you know are reinforced, illuminated and deepened. You find encouragement and insight into the person of God on every page. The more you read, really open your heart and read, the more you move closer to God in every way. Let the Word of God, sweeter than any wild honey, sink deep into your soul, into the very foundation of your mind and spirit, until the words of God become an inseparable part of all your waking thoughts.

2. *Worries about Accuracy:* Do not be overly concerned about the issue of the veracity and reliability of the English translation of the Bible you are reading. In the upcoming "Essential Doctrines of the Bible" outline and series, we will have occasion to discuss in some detail the text and canon of the scriptures (see also the note below on versions), but for now you may be assured that your standard Bible will be quite adequate for your purposes. To use an analogy, if we were to become concerned about our dinner and take it to a microbiology lab for exhaustive analysis, we would probably find out that while it did contain some minute impurities, these would not pose any significant threat (and surely the threat of refraining from eating at all would be far more serious!). This is the case with most widely available versions of the Bible. Certainly, before becoming teachers we would want more detailed information (knowledge of the original languages upon which the translations are based, for example). But for personal spirituality and growth, the Bible you have is good, solid food. Not partaking of it is the only serious danger, for by reading it we build our relationship with God day by day as we continue to learn about Him and His Son through the Word He has given us.

3. *Help from the Holy Spirit:* Just as the Bible is the Christian's ultimate standard, so the Holy Spirit is his ultimate teacher. As believers, when we read the scriptures (our visible guide), we are assisted by the Holy Spirit (our invisible guide: 1Thes.4:9; 1Jn.2:27). So when we read the scripture, we should not approach it as a chore to be gotten through, but rather eagerly, as an opportunity to learn. We should take time to read for meaning, to stop and think, reflect and consider what we are reading, and to allow the Spirit to teach us about God from the Bible. After all, the Holy Spirit's ministry to our lives will be most effective when He has something to work with, some spiritual capital and understanding of scripture to use as leverage in guiding and directing us.

The Holy Spirit works with truth - not surprising as we are told that the Bible is the "sword of the Spirit", the weapon with which we believers are to confront all the falsehood and evil of this world (Eph.6:17).

4. *Help from Human Teachers:* Just as the effectiveness of the Spirit's ministry is increased proportional to our intake of the Word, so the process of spiritual growth can, should, and ultimately must be accelerated by another essential element in God's plan: prepared persons with the gift of teaching. Ideally, these three elements work harmoniously together: the individual Christian reads the Bible diligently under the influence of the Holy Spirit's ministry, while also availing himself of doctrinally accurate Bible teaching on a regular and systematic basis. In fact, if any one of these three elements is removed, spiritual growth suffers (at best). Without the Spirit's ministry, the things of God seem to be nonsense and meaningless (1Cor.2:14); without proper teaching, the believer is necessarily limited to the more obvious and basic principles that he can glean on his own from scripture (milk, as opposed to solid food: 1Cor.3:2); without a personal program of reading the Bible for himself, the believer is both largely deprived of daily reinforcement and communion with God's truth, and at the same time vulnerable to inaccurate or untrue teaching (Eph.4:14).

These issues are to be discussed in more depth in our upcoming Essential Doctrines of the Bible series, but for now let the principle stand that all believers should take pains to:

- Maintain ***fellowship*** with God in the Holy Spirit (confessing their sins to God whenever necessary that this fellowship be not hindered: Eph.5:18; 1Jn.1:9).
- Maintain the habit of regularly receiving scriptural Bible ***teaching*** from a source they have tested (Jas.1:19-21; Heb.10:24-25).
- Maintain the daily practice of ***reading*** and searching the scriptures for themselves (2Tim.3:16; Heb.4:12).

5. *Versions and their Veracity:* As mentioned above, most general versions of the Bible (that is, versions that are *not* produced by a specific group for the essential purpose of proving that group's points) will serve admirably as daily companions for scripture reading. Probably the four most popular and widely available English translations of the Bible are:

- *The King James Version (KJV)*

Advantages: unquestioned scholarship; italics for supplied words; creatively ambiguous, reflecting ambivalent constructions in the original languages.

Disadvantages: too far removed from contemporary English to be easily understood.

- *The Revised Standard Version (RSV)*

Advantages: a scholarly production; smooth, homogeneous, literary language.

Disadvantages: the translation is a bit too vanilla and lacks impact; preference is sometimes given to liberal scholarly theories over the actual original texts.

- *The New American Standard Bible (NASB)*

Advantages: the best "literal" translation in modern English.

Disadvantages: a far from seamless style; the very desire to promote literalness over meaning results in instances of obscure and misleading translation.

- *The New International Version (NIV)*

Advantages: the best "real English" translation available; its insightful approach to translation makes this version the most powerful "read" of the Bible available.

Disadvantages: this is also the most hazardous version to use, because its daring translations often give a misleading sense; when using this version, it is best to keep another Bible handy and double check "surprising" passages.

But why limit yourself to one? It would be helpful to read several, rather than the same version over and over. This will enable you to get a slightly different take and new insights from the different translations. My own feeling is that the NASB is perhaps the best version to read first, the NIV the best to read second.

6. *Suggestions on Specific Procedures:*

- Try to do at least a little bit every day. It's much better to be consistent with reading a chapter or two of the Bible day in and day out, than promise yourself to do much more (from the best of intentions), then get frustrated and lose your momentum should life interfere with your plans.
- Try to set a specific time and place. Make Bible reading a regular and inviolable part of your routine - like your morning coffee or paper or exercise. Make it a habit, preferably at a set time in the same place where possible. You probably brush your teeth every day, maybe more than once. Reading the Bible every day is at least as important as most of our daily routines (and even better for us too).

- Read several sections at once. A common stumbling block for those who set themselves to read the Bible regularly is the length and complexity of the Old Testament. Consider reading several books of the Bible at once (be sure to include something from the New Testament). A simple approach is to read two chapters a day: one from each Testament. That way you'll get through the New Testament several times before completing the Old Testament once, but that is perfectly fine since the New Testament is the more concentrated and explicit revelation of Jesus Christ. Many Bible bookstores sell multiple string bookmarks that will easily allow you to read a number of books of your Bible at once without losing your various places.
- Read for meaning and understanding. Don't rush through your Bible reading time. Better to read one verse and get something from it than three chapters whose contents you can barely recall afterwards just to "get through it". Reading your Bible should be an enjoyable activity - more like leisure than work, even if it is good for you. Give yourself the chance to understand and be inspired and instructed by what you read. Try to keep a good attitude whenever you sit down to read your Bible. And don't worry about memorization. It is always more important that you understand what you read than that you can remember it word for word (the two definitely do not go together). After all, you are reading a translation of the original texts; there are many such translations and all are worded differently, so it is clearly the idea, not the exact wording, that should be the focus of our efforts. Memorization can be useful, but if it is a choice between continuing to read or going over the same few verses until they stick, you are better off moving forward with reading.
- **How** you do it not as important as **that** you do it. For spiritual safety and spiritual growth, there is no substitute for reading the Word of God.