

## **Chapter 1**

### **Can a Fish See the Water It Swims In?**

*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth—John 14:13.*

Can a fish see the water it swims in?

What a strange question to ask as we begin this exploration of why the Bible is so hard to understand! What in the world does what a fish sees have to do with understanding the Bible?

The question illustrates one of the reasons we struggle to understand the Bible.

The question reflects our desire to know. We want answers to our questions. Most of us do not know how to answer the question “Can a fish see the water it swims in?” Yet, most of us would hazard a guess . . . probably without any basis for our position! Someone might go so far as to Google the question in search of an answer. We want answers. We like to have the facts. We want to know the truth. We want to get it right.

Our focus on knowing the facts as a way of knowing truth is an example of how we read the Bible.

I have a second reason for asking the question about a fish seeing the water it swims in. The question illustrates the thrust of this chapter: *we* don’t see the water *we* swim in! By that I mean we don’t think about how we have been trained to think and read. We just read without thinking about it. And that’s how we read the Bible—along with everything else we read. We have been trained to read looking for facts to believe.

How we read the Bible is one of the primary reasons the Bible is so hard to understand.

### **The Water We Swim In**

Those of us who grew up in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been shaped by a movement known as The Enlightenment. Our education was based upon the thinking of the Enlightenment. Consequently, the Enlightenment is the intellectual water we swim in. It shaped how we think.

The Enlightenment was a revolution in thinking that took place in Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It was rooted in the development of science with its effort to understand the mysteries of creation by answering the questions who, what, when, where, why, how.

The foundational principle of the Enlightenment was human reason. The Enlightenment thinkers argued that all of life’s mysteries could be explained through the use of science, the intellect, and reason. This approach to understanding led to a focus upon facts that can be proven. It spoke of verifiable facts as truth. All of the scientific advancements we enjoy today—in nutrition, in medicine, in technology, in

electronics, in the exploration of space—are based on this line of thought.

This trust in our intellectual abilities and reason had a huge impact on the field of religion. It led to a rejection of the traditional religious explanations of life, challenging the authority of the Church in that day. It rejected any supernatural dimension of religion, including the idea of revelation or miracles or the divinity of Jesus. Human reason replaced divine revelation as the measure for truth. In the place of traditional religious understandings, the Enlightenment led to a philosophy called Deism. Deism viewed God as the Master Designer who created and set the universe in motion. But Deism did not see God as directly involved in the functioning of the universe. It understood creation as operating through the natural laws that the Master Designer set in place. Deism used the image of a clockmaker to speak of God and creation. Once the clock (the universe) had been created and set in motion, the clockmaker (God) stepped back and let it function. The Creator gave humans the intellectual ability (reason) to explore and understand how the clock functions (science).<sup>1</sup>

A second foundational principle of the Enlightenment was its emphasis on the individual. This exaltation of the individual challenged the hierarchal social order of the day. It gave dignity and power to the common person while challenging the power of kings and the nobility and the Church. This emphasis gave birth to the concept of democracy. In France, it led to the French revolution and the overthrow of the French monarchy. In the New World, this thinking shaped the founding documents of the American Revolution and the fledging nation that became the United States. Alongside the development of democracy, the Enlightenment also led to the development of capitalism and public education as ways to empower common people.

The social upheaval of the past sixty years is the product of Enlightenment thinking. The rejection of tradition, the questioning of authority, the emphasis upon individualism, the ideas of freedom and equality and equal rights, the confidence in human progress—each is an expression of Enlightenment thinking. The continued evolution of Enlightenment thinking has produced what is called post-modern thought. Post-modern thinking rejects any external standard of right and wrong. Objective truth is replaced by subjective relativism. What works for a particular individual is what is “right” for that person. Post-modern thought is expressed in the saying, “It’s all good.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the Enlightenment’s revolution in thinking took place over three hundred years ago, it continues to influence our thinking in the twenty-first century. Its influence on how we think is beyond our awareness. We don’t see it until it is pointed out. It is just how we think. That is, it is the water we swim in.

Consequently, it is how we read the Bible.

## **Reading the Bible through the Lens of the Enlightenment**

We naturally and unconsciously read the Bible—and everything else—through the lens of our Enlightenment shaped thinking.

This scientifically shaped pattern of thinking leads us to look for facts to believe as we read the

Bible. We want to know what is true. However, reading the Bible through this lens also creates a dilemma for us. The Bible records things that human reason struggles to accept. Reason leads us to question some of the things we read in the Bible. Did God create the world in seven literal days (Genesis 1)? Were Adam and Eve the first man and woman (Genesis 2)? Was there a universal flood that destroyed all of creation except those on the ark (Genesis 6-9)? Did the Red Sea really part so that the people of Israel could walk across on dry ground (Exodus 14)? Did an iron ax head really float (2 Kings 6:1-7)? Was Jesus born of a virgin (Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38)? Did Jesus really heal the sick and raise the dead? Did Jesus walk on water (Matthew 14:22-27)? Was Jesus raised from the dead (Matthew 28:10-15, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-18)? Our questions lead us to wonder if what the Bible says is true.

This dilemma creates an emotional bind. How do we believe what the Bible says when what the Bible says goes against human reason? This dilemma and its emotional bind are generally resolved in one of two ways.

One way is to accept what the Bible says without question. Those who embrace this way respond to these kinds of questions by answering “Absolutely! It’s in the Bible so it’s true!” These readers exalt what the Bible says over human reason. They view the Bible as a *divine* book given to us by God. As such, it is totally trustworthy without question or doubt. It never enters their mind to question what the Bible says. For them, there is no emotional bind.<sup>3</sup>

The second way of dealing with the dilemma is to follow human reason. Those who follow human reason respond to the questions I raised by saying “No! Iron ax heads don’t float. Men don’t walk on water.” They doubt the veracity of the biblical account, sometimes going so far as to outright reject it. They view the Bible as a *human* book that cannot be taken literally.

Both of these camps are found in today’s Christian culture. The differences in how they read the Bible lead to greater differences. Their understandings of the Christian life are fundamentally at odds with one another. They generally take different sides on moral issues. They are often in conflict with one another. They struggle to find common ground.<sup>4</sup>

So, which side is right? Our question arises naturally out of how we have been trained to think. Our scientific training teaches us there can be only one right answer. It trained us to think in terms of either-or.

In spite of how we have been trained to think, I would suggest that both groups are right ... and both groups are wrong! They are partially right and partially wrong.<sup>5</sup>

Both sides make the same mistake. They read the Bible through the lens of the Enlightenment. They read the Bible as though it were a Western book written with a scientific orientation. As a result, they are both partially right and partially wrong.

The Bible is not the product of Western, scientific thought. It is the product of Near Eastern thinking, written before the development of scientific thought. The Bible approaches life from a spiritual perspective, not a scientific perspective. (This understanding will be presented more fully in Chapter 2.) Whereas science is primarily interested in the physical universe, the Bible is interested in the spiritual and relational dimensions of life. Science uses the word *truth* to speak of verifiable facts about the natural world. The Bible never uses the word truth in those terms. In the Bible, truth is used in reference to what God is like

(God's character), in reference to God's ways, and in reference to the nature of life. It is often referred to as wisdom.

By reading the Bible as though it were a Western book, both sides come to conclusions that are partially right and partially wrong. Both fail to see the larger reality. The Bible is both human and divine. It is a divine book *and* a human book.

The Bible is divine because it is the record of God's self-revelation to and through the nation of Israel.<sup>6</sup> It records Israel's understanding of what God revealed, specifically about who God is, about God's nature, and about God's ways. It speaks of who we humans are and of our human condition. It addresses the relationship we have with God. The Bible is a divine book because the Spirit is at work in God's self-revelation, in the understanding of that revelation, and in the recording of it in what we call the Bible.

On the other hand, the Bible is also a human book. It was written by humans. It reflects their understanding of God and God's ways during their life time. It reflects the authors' understanding of the world (world view). It reflects their historical and cultural context as the authors spoke God's word to their specific situations.

### **Human and Divine: the Dual Nature of the Bible**

This dual nature of the Bible is reflected in what the New Testament writers said about the Hebrew Scriptures.

The author of 2 Peter wrote: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:19-21, NRSV).<sup>7</sup> This verse emphasizes the divine dimension of the Bible. Three different times, in three different ways, the writer underscored the divine origin of scripture, arguing that it was more than human speculation about God:

no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,  
no prophecy ever came by human will,  
moved by the Holy Spirit.

Because these individuals, moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God, what they said is reliable. While emphasizing the divine aspect of scripture, the verse also speaks of the human dimension. Men and women spoke for God. These authors were not puppets manipulated by God. They were not robots remotely controlled by God. God did not override their personalities as they spoke for God. Rather, God worked through them and their situation to communicate spiritual truth.

A second text, from 2 Timothy, also emphasizes the reliability of scripture because of its divine nature. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work," (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The author described the scriptures as "inspired by God" or God-breathed. The writer drew imagery from Genesis 2 to speak of scripture. In the Genesis passage, the LORD God breathed

into the man he had created from the dust of the ground and he (the man) became a living being (Genesis 2:7). In the same way, the Spirit of God breathes into scripture so that it becomes a living, dynamic document through which God speaks, guiding the reader into spiritual understanding of God and the ways of God. This text does not make reference to the human dimension of scripture.

Whereas the Timothy passage emphasizes the divine nature of scripture, a text from the book of Hebrews reflects the human dimension of scripture.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, (Hebrews 1:1-3).

These verses state that God has spoken, both in the past and in the present times (the days of the first disciples). They draw a contrast between how God spoke in the past and in the present. In the past, God spoke through the prophets. God's word came through human beings, speaking in and to their particular historical situation. They spoke "in many and various ways." The original Greek carries the idea of "in bits and pieces." The thought is that what God said through the prophets gave us glimpses of God and God's ways, but not a complete view. The prophets' understanding of God was partial; it was limited. How God spoke through the prophets stands in contrast to how God spoke through the Son, that is, through Jesus. The Son is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." The writer's point is that Jesus was the full revelation of God's character and of God's ways. Nothing more can be said about God than what was said in Jesus.<sup>8</sup> (Understanding this contrast teaches us to interpret the Bible in light of how Jesus lived and what he taught. Jesus is the lens through which we are to read the Bible. I'll have more to say about this approach to reading the Bible in Chapter 4.)

The dual nature of scripture—both human and divine—creates its own dilemma: how do we know what is human and what is divine? How do we know what God said? How do we identify the spiritual truth the Bible teaches? I'll address these questions in Chapters 3 and 8. Using our scientific-oriented thinking, we can learn to separate the human dimension from the divine dimension so we can identify spiritual truth that is applicable and relevant to every time and culture.

How we read the Bible—through Enlightenment-shaped, scientific oriented thinking—contributes to why the Bible is so hard to understand. The good news is that we can use that way of thinking to help us understand the Bible once we recognize the dual nature of the Bible.

## **The Stigmatism That Impacts How We Read the Bible**

Stigmatism is a condition of the eye that affects how we see and what we see. It hinders our ability to see clearly, especially at night. Often, we are not aware of the stigmatism until an optometrist points it out and corrects it with glasses. The Enlightenment lens through which we read the Bible carries with it an inherent stigmatism that affects how we read the Bible. This so-called stigmatism is tied to our social world. Again,

we generally are unaware of this aspect of our thinking.

The social and economic levels with which we live are vastly different from those reflected in the Bible. (The societal and economic situations reflected in the Bible are addressed in Chapter 2.) Through our capitalistic society, we have the ability (power) to earn money and improve the economic level at which we live. Capitalism allows us to enjoy some degree of affluence, social status related to that affluence, and a sense of personal power over our lives. Thus, when we read the Bible, we read the Bible from the perspective of affluence, social status, and power. We unconsciously look for things in the Bible that validate our affluence, status, and power. Reading the Bible from this perspective often causes us to miss what the Bible has to say. In particular, we often miss what the Bible says about material wealth, about political and economic systems that exploit or neglect the poor and most vulnerable (the message of the Hebrew prophets), and about society's responsibility to care for and empower the poor and powerless. (Most of the Bible was written from the perspective of the marginalized and powerless in society.) Tragically, our capitalistic-shaped thinking makes it difficult for us to accept or embrace what Jesus taught about material wealth and the kingdom of God.

In addition, most of us have grown up in a society shaped by the leadership of men, particularly white men. Although the women's rights movement and the civil rights movement have made great strides in our country in the past century, much of our thinking is still shaped by our experience of the dominance of white men. Thus, when we read the Bible, we see patriarchy as normal. We often fail to see the powerless plight of women in the biblical stories or how vulnerable they were. We do not recognize the injustices with which they lived. In addition, we fail to see the radically different way Jesus viewed and treated women.<sup>9</sup> We often miss the Apostle Paul's Christ-shaped principle that, in Christ, all social distinctions fall away. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28; also see Colossians 3:11). Missing Jesus's and Paul's teachings, many continue to treat women—and others—as subservient to male domination, even appealing to the Bible as validation for doing so! They follow the pattern of an ancient culture rather than the spiritual principles Jesus taught and lived.

Another dimension of this social lens—similar to the patriarchal dimension—is the pride we have in and the allegiance we pledge to our country. During our lifetimes, our nation has been viewed as a world leader among all the nations of the world—some might say *the* world leader. We as a nation enjoy a power most nations can only envy. Our military strength is unparalleled. Our economy impacts the economies of every other nation. Our technologies rival and often exceed those found in other developed countries.

Our status as a nation impacts how we read the Bible. It often blinds us to its message.

The perspective of the biblical writers was just the opposite of our national experience. They wrote from the perspective of those dominated by and exploited by more powerful nations: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, the Hellenists, Rome. These nations used their military power to conquer and destroy the Hebrew people. They used their military might to demand financial tribute that drained their local economies. When the nations of Israel and Judah were strong, the prophets confronted them, condemning them for following the ways of the other nations. The prophets confronted the way the elite class in Judah

and Israel used their power to gain economic advantages over others, living in excess and luxury while others lived in want and need. The prophets confronted the nations' failure to use their power on behalf of others. They condemned the neglect and exploitation of the powerless and most vulnerable: the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, the oppressed. The Hebrew vision of the Messiah and his Kingdom was of a nation characterized by peace, not war, of a nation in which the economic benefits of the community were enjoyed by all, not by an elite few, of a nation whose leaders advocated for and protected the most vulnerable. Their vision was of a world shaped by the character of God, following the ways of God.

One of the dominant themes in both the Old and New Testaments is the theme of reversal. Mary's song in Luke 1 is an example of this recurring theme:

(The Mighty One) has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:51-53).

We often miss these themes—and struggle with them when we recognize them—because of our historical context. We are part of a powerful and rich nation!

The vast differences between our life experiences and that of the biblical authors and audience make it hard to understand the Bible.

## **The Bifocals Through Which We Read the Bible**

Another factor in how we read the Bible complicates our understanding of what we read: what we already think and believe.

Our understanding of what the Bible says is complicated by what we already believe. We all come to scripture with a belief structure—a theology. Those beliefs are ones we have been taught or picked up somewhere along the journey. Every one of us, without exception, reads scripture through the lenses of those beliefs.

Reading through the lens of our own beliefs is normal and unavoidable. The danger comes when we are not conscious of this belief-shaped lens. When we do not recognize this set of inherent lenses, we unconsciously read with a bias, looking for confirmation of what we already believe. Thus, we expect what we already believe, look for what we already believe, and see what we already believe. This bias-of-belief blocks our ability to recognize what the text is actually saying. More, this bias-of-belief fosters resistance to what the scripture actually says when it is different from what we believe. As a result, we use the Bible to reinforce how we already think rather than allowing the truth of scripture to shape our thinking.

In the story of The Garden (Genesis 2-3), for example, a serpent enticed the man and the woman to disobey God's one directive: don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17;

3:1-5). An untrained reader is quick to identify the serpent as Satan or the Devil. Yet, nowhere in the text is there a reference to Satan. In fact, the word “Satan” is only used in three places in Hebrew scripture: Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7; Zechariah 3:1. In each of these places, the word is not a proper name “Satan” but a noun with an article: the accuser, the adversary. Understanding the serpent as a reference to Satan is reading a New Testament understanding of Satan back into the ancient Hebrew story.

The popular understanding of salvation is about going to heaven when we die. We have been taught to “ask Jesus into our heart” so we can go to heaven. Thus, when we read the Bible, we look for confirmation of this belief. We fail to recognize that nowhere in the Bible is there any reference to “asking Jesus into your heart.” In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul outlined the gospel—the good news of salvation—he proclaimed. He described salvation as the transformation of heart and mind that the Spirit orchestrates in the life of the follower of Jesus. The final result of the Spirit’s transforming work is conforming the follower of Jesus into the likeness of Christ (see Romans 8:29). This transforming work is rooted in God’s steadfast, faithful love and grace (Romans 5:8). Nothing, Paul said, can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39). In his description of salvation—from Romans 1:18 to Romans 8:39—there is no reference to heaven or to going to heaven. For Paul, salvation referred to the transforming work of the Spirit in our lives as we live in relationship with God as beloved children (see Romans 8:14-17) and the followers of Jesus. What we already believe determines what we see in the Bible as well as what we miss!

Another expression of this belief-bias is our familiarity with a biblical passage. What we already think the passage says can blind us to what the passage actually says. For example, a common understanding of John 14:1-3 is that Jesus was going to prepare a place in heaven for us and, then, he would return. Yet, the word “heaven” is not used anywhere in John 14 or in the larger context of John 13-16. The place Jesus prepared for his followers was a place in relationship with the Father. Jesus was the one through whom the disciples had come to know God as Father (14:6, 9). In going away, Jesus was not abandoning them or leaving them as orphans (14:18). The Spirit would come to be for them another Companion like Jesus had been (14:16), one who would dwell in and among Jesus’ followers (14:17). In the Spirit, Jesus and the Father would make their home in the life of the disciple (14:23, the word “home” in verse 23 is the exact same word in the original that Jesus used in verse 2 in reference to the place he was going to prepare). Jesus’s teaching was about the intimate, indwelling relationship his disciples would have with God through the Spirit. Familiarity often hinders our ability to grasp what the original author intended for his original audience.

### **The Tint of the Lens with which We Read**

At least one other factor in how we read the Bible needs to be identified as a challenge in reading the Bible. That additional factor is merit-based thinking. Everything we read is colored by this way of thinking.

We humans inherently function out of merit-based, if ... then thinking. We think in terms of earning



and deserving. This kind of thinking produces relationships structured around us-them patterns. It causes us to function out of tribal thinking. In addition to us-them thinking and relating, merit-based thinking fosters better than-less than thinking. Those in our circle or tribe are viewed as better than those other people.

This merit-based thinking—which leads to us-them thinking which fosters better than-less than thinking—lies outside our awareness. It is the tint of the lens through which we read. It is the water we swim in! This kind of thinking colors what we read the Bible. Consequently, we look for things that give validity to our tribe and justify our thinking about “the other.” I have more to say about merit-based thinking in Chapter 4.

### **Reading the Bible through These Tinted, Bifocal Lenses**

In summary, we read the Bible in at least four ways that are beyond our awareness: thinking shaped by the Enlightenment, thinking shaped by our social context, what we already believe, and merit-based, if . . . then thinking. Ironically, reading the Bible through these tinted lenses can thwart the very reason we read the Bible. We read the Bible because we want to know what it says. But these lenses, rather than helping us see what the Bible says, blur what we see. Because of this blurring, we often miss what the Bible actually says.

One way we miss what the Bible actually says is by asking the wrong questions. We ask Western, scientifically-oriented questions that focus on details not addressed in the biblical story. Where was the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2)? Where did Cain get his wife (Genesis 3)? Did people really live hundreds of years (Genesis 5)? In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, why did the priest and Levite pass by on the other side of the road rather than help the wounded man (Luke 10:30-32)? Why did the other nine lepers not return to give thanks to Jesus for healing them (Luke 17:11-29)?

The Bible was not designed to answer Western, scientifically-oriented questions—nor does it answer them! When the Bible does not answer our questions, we commonly resort to speculation in order to come up with an answer. Our questions and our speculations lead us away from what the biblical author was saying. In pursuing our speculations (following our own thinking), we miss the truth being communicated. We miss what the Bible says.

Our questions are a part of our scientifically-oriented focus on facts. We look for facts that we can declare as “true” and, thereby, believe (or facts to support what we already believe). We miss what the biblical writers were saying when we look for facts to believe. For example, when we focus on the details in the biblical story, we miss the truth the writer was communicating through the story. We miss the meaning of the story. (I’ll illustrate this reality in Chapter 5 with the story of Jesus walking on the water. I address the biblical writers’ use of story in the next chapter.)

Missing what the Bible does say, we naturally read our beliefs into what we read (as I described above). In doing so, we use the Bible to support what we already believe. Rather than allowing the truth of scripture to shape our thinking—what the Apostle Paul called the renewing of the mind—we use the Bible to reinforce our thinking. We quote the Bible to validate what we already believe.

As we miss what the Bible says, as we look for what we already believe, we often hold to beliefs and practices that are not in harmony with God's character or the ways Jesus lived and taught. They reflect our human nature, not the ways of God.

We naturally read the Bible through these four sets of lenses—that is, until we learn to recognize them. Although we will never escape these influences in how we think and read, we can learn to read the Bible differently. We can learn to hear what the biblical authors intended to say by learning to see the water we swim in.

But how we read the Bible is not the only reason the Bible is so hard to understand. The Bible itself presents its own challenges. Those challenges are the focus of the next chapter.

### **A Guide for Personal Reflection and Journaling, for Group Conversation and Discussion**

The questions in this section provide a guide both for personal reflection and for discussion in a small group setting. These questions are designed to engage you in processing the content of each chapter and your experience of it. These questions are a guide. Have freedom to choose the questions to which you respond.

1. When did you first begin to read and study the Bible?

How has your reading and study of the Bible changed over the years?

2. This book and this chapter in particular assume that many readers find the Bible difficult to understand.

What kind of struggles have you experienced in reading and trying to understand the Bible? Relate a specific example of your struggle.

What emotion(s) does the struggle to understand stir within you?

Relate an example of something in the Bible that you do not understand.

3. The chapter identified two different dimensions of scripture: the human dimension and the divine dimension.

How are these two dimensions of scripture related?

What is the implication of these two dimensions of scripture for reading the Bible?

Give an example of the human dimension of scripture.

Give an example of how the human dimension can be confused with divine truth.

4. Four different ways we unconsciously read the Bible were identified in this chapter as barriers to understanding what the Bible says: (1) our Western, scientifically trained thinking; (2) our cultural experience, including our socio-economic advantages and standing, our experience of a patriarchal culture, and the power of our nation; (3) the beliefs we already hold; (4) our merit-based, if ... then thinking.

Choose one of the four to discuss:

How is this particular way of reading the Bible a barrier to understanding it?

How does awareness of this way of reading the Bible change how you read it?

How do we deal with these so-called lenses and the barriers they create?

5. What emotional reaction does the understanding of these so-called lenses stir in you?

6. Identify a belief you surrendered through reading the Bible.

7. What in this chapter was helpful to you? Why?

What in this chapter stirred discomfort or angst in you?

- <sup>1</sup> This rejection of anything supernatural led to a predictable reaction against Enlightenment thinking by religious authorities and the established Church. Late in the nineteenth century in the United States, this reaction was led by a group who identified themselves as fundamentalists because they held to what they identified as fundamentals of the faith. In the mid twentieth century, this group began to refer to themselves as evangelicals because the term fundamentalist carried a negative image.
- <sup>2</sup> This social upheaval is a contributing factor in the decline of the institutional church in the past fifty years.
- <sup>3</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, the words “inerrant and infallible” were introduced to describe this view of the Bible. What the Bible says can be accepted as absolute truth because it is inerrant, that is, without error, and infallible. Those who view the Bible as inerrant and infallible read the Bible literally, accepting everything it says as truth, to be believed and trusted without question. This view of the Bible lies behind Creationism, the belief that God created the world in seven literal days.
- <sup>4</sup> Painting with broad strokes, one could say that one side emphasizes right belief (orthodoxy) as foundational to right living (orthopraxy); the other emphasizes right living more than right belief.
- <sup>5</sup> Most issues cannot be reduced to the simplistic thinking of either-or, black-and-white dichotomies. Issues are more complex and nuanced than that. The complexity of issues means no side has a monopoly on truth. The perspective of each side has something to offer that can lead to a fuller understanding of the issue.
- <sup>6</sup> Throughout Hebrew history, God was seeking to reveal the divine self to the people of Israel. For Christians, God’s most complete self-revelation is in Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible is the record of that self-revelation. The Bible is not the record of human speculation about God but rather the record of God's divine self-communication. It is not the record of human groping after God but rather the record of God's seeking to be known. In God’s self-revelation and self-communication, God was reaching out to establish relationship with humankind.
- <sup>7</sup> All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible (copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.) and are used by permission.
- <sup>8</sup> Paying attention to what God has said in the Son was the thrust of the author’s message (see Hebrews 2:1).
- <sup>9</sup> I address Jesus’s view and treatment of women in my book [A God-Shaped World: Exploring Jesus’s Teachings about the Kingdom of God and the Implications for the Church Today](#).