

# Growing Up with the Bible

## Understanding What it Says, Yielding to What it Means

*by Ralph D. Winter*

**W**hen you are 80 years old and are asked to give your life testimony, it is asking for a very long story! I have decided simply to trace my 80-years of personal experience with the Bible. The Bible's influence is probably the most important single strand in the tapestry of my life—that is, my increasing appreciation for and understanding of the Bible.

I was born into a devout Christian family, which is one of the most important things in my whole life. My parents were loyal to the local church and loyal to Christian Endeavor, which was a very evangelistic global youth movement (and still is). I gave my life to Christ at about the age of ten, and began sporadically to read through a little Gospel of John. Later at Lake Avenue Church, my Sunday School teacher one summer challenged his class of 7th grade boys to read into the New Testament a chapter a day.

This had a remarkable effect on me. I ran into Matt. 5:16, “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” I discovered Matt. 6:33, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you”—things like food, clothing, shelter. I found in Matt. 7 the house built upon the sand, the “strait” gate and so on. In chapter 11:28-30, I read “Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly of heart: and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Or, “What does it profit if a man gains the whole world and loses his own soul” in Matt. 16.

Verses like these were meat sticking to my ribs. That summer I was really moved by the Bible.

That very same summer (between my 10th and 11th year of high school), I got a job at 35¢ per hour, from 3:30 in the afternoon until 3:30 the next morning. The first thing I bought with my first paycheck was the most expensive leather bound Scofield Reference Bible available.

Even more influential than reading one chapter a day for my Sunday School class was my encounter with Dan Fuller and becoming part of a little Lake Avenue Church Navigators “Dunamis” group, which met at my house for

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three years running right up to Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 and WWII. Both before that and during WWII I memorized 500 verses in the King James Version (of course), shading in each verse in my treasured Scofield Bible.

After the war (during which I graduated in engineering from Caltech), I studied the Bible further at Westmont College, where I also taught. Next came a year at Princeton Seminary, then Fuller Seminary (the year it opened—1947) and finally Prairie Bible Institute, where I went for one semester to observe their unique “Search-Question” teaching technique—of which I highly approved (and still do).

In my teenage years my perspective on the Bible was that the most important verse was “He that winneth souls is wise.” My simple idea was that God wanted us to get people into heaven. Gradually a different phrase added further meaning: the idea of “winning people to Christ.”

At first I did not realize the difference. The phrase “winning people to Christ” does not itself refer to getting people into heaven but into a permanent relationship with Christ—not something you can walk away with, like a ticket to heaven you can keep in your wallet. Of course, being born again into the family of Christ does imply eternal life, but the phrase, “winning people to Christ,” does not refer to heaven in so many words, as if getting to heaven is more important than our fellowship with God in His family and becoming involved in “the family business (war).”

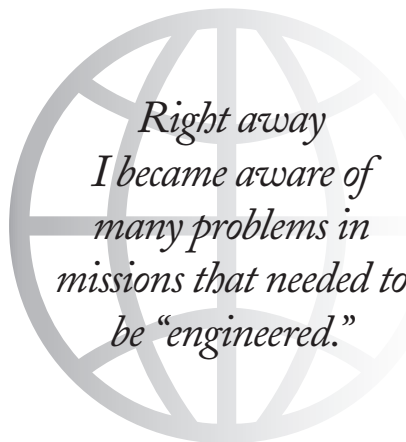
Later, due to numerous Biblical references that I finally could not overlook, I realized that a still larger picture was that believers are called *to glorify God in all nations*. You find this thought in Charles Wesley’s hymn “Oh For a Thousand Tongues,” where he puts it,

My gracious Master and my God,  
Assist me to proclaim,  
To spread through all the earth abroad,  
The honors of Thy name.

Glorifying God in all the earth includes all my former ideas but adds

additional insight. It explains why at the peak of their use, Irwin Moon’s Moody Institute of Science 16mm films were being shown on the mission field 2,000 times a day! (That greatly exceeds even the use of the Jesus film.)

More recently a fourth addition of Biblical perspective has come to my thinking: I see now that to glorify God we need not only to respect and reclaim scientific discoveries of his handiwork, but we need to seek to make very clear that it is Satan—not God—who causes much of the evil we often hear people attributing



to God, such as in James Dobson’s book, *When God Doesn’t Make Sense*.

In that book, when there is an example of some tragedy that “does not make sense,” the book attributes it to God’s mysterious will, not to Satan. But if disease germs are the work of Satan—rather than of God—should we be blaming God for all the really tragic illnesses? Isn’t Satan delighted if he can persuade us all in the face of evil simply to resign ourselves to what we think is the will of God, and not attack evil at its root? By now in history we know a huge amount about fighting microbiological evil, but Christian individuals and Christian organizations are doing very little with that knowledge.

If we were to do something about that, in the name of Christ, would not that glorify God? But to my knowledge there is no substantial Christian institution in the world that is seeking systematically to destroy one by one the disease pathogens

behind the illnesses that drag nine out of ten Americans into premature death. The Carter Center is, but not in the name of Christ.

Back to my story. Because of the Lake Avenue Church’s strong concern for missions, growing up there (when missions were always half of the total budget) I had always assumed that any serious believer would be willing to serve anywhere. Thus, as an engineering graduate I looked for opportunities to serve the cause of missions as an engineer. Right away I became aware of many problems in missions that needed to be “engineered.”

I was captured by two challenges: 1) the idea of teaching the Bible with motion pictures; and 2) the idea that, by employing newer techniques, missionary language learning could be greatly speeded up. I could not do both at the same time.

I chose to pursue the huge barrier in missions of the task of language learning. To do that I earned a Ph.D. in linguistics (at Cornell) in order to gain the credibility I thought I needed to make changes in missionary language learning.

In the process of getting that Ph.D., I realized that no current university department in the USA focused specifically on language learning in general (I would have had to major in a specific language like French, Swahili or Chinese). I thus essentially gave up my own very novel idea of language teaching, went back to finish seminary at Princeton, and became a missionary in Guatemala for ten years. There we worked with an Indian tribe that Cameron Townsend had something to do with before he started Wycliffe Bible Translators. After ten years in Guatemala I was invited to be a professor at Fuller and become involved on the ground floor of its new School of World Mission.

I was glad for my time at Fuller. A thousand missionaries passed through my classes and through their papers and theses I learned details about strange mission fields all over the world. After ten years, in view of all the new ideas about missions that were being churned up, I came to realize

that it was necessary to establish a major base nearby where we could not just teach, but actually put things into practice and promote all these new ideas and important insights.

The new Center and University we have established is located on a former Christian college campus in Northeast Pasadena (the college moved to San Diego). It took us 13 years, with a lot of amazing help from God, to buy that campus plus a hundred homes surrounding it. We now have close to a hundred families in our mission society (the Frontier Mission Fellowship), about half of them working in different places around the country and the world. In addition, 35 other organizations are at work on the campus.

But, getting back to the Bible. Across these many years I have found that the Bible has very clearly been for me the most important dimension of additional learning and growing. I feel I have learned more since I was 70 (about the Bible and many other things) than in my entire life before that.

First of all, I have had to discover that some of my first thoughts about certain Bible verses were misunderstandings. I mentioned earlier “the strait gate” in Matt. 7. I thought the word meant “straight” when it really means “narrow.” When Paul told the Corinthians, “you are not straitened in me but straitened in your own selves” he did not mean that he could not straighten them out and so they were to straighten themselves out (as I had thought when I first memorized that verse). He meant that they were not being hindered by him, but they were hindering themselves. The word *strait* here is like the Straits of Magellan, a narrow, hindering passageway. The same is true for the word “let” in the King James. “He that letteth will let” means “He that hinders will hinder.” Like in tennis, a “let” ball is one that is hindered by hitting the net and barely goes over. These examples are relatively trivial, but you get the idea.

Something more serious. Way back after WWII I went to teach and study at Westmont. Samuel Zwemer, a famous missionary statesman, came

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through as a speaker and I had a chance to talk to him personally. Among other things he warned against taking the Bible off on tangents, and mentioned some people who interpret the Parable of the Good Samaritan to mean that the donkey represents the church and the travel to Jericho represents the church age and so on, thus missing the blunt and plain meaning of the passage, which is apparently too difficult to accept.

I also discovered that the Bible welcomes people from outside the genetic lineage of the Chosen People. I have been studying the book of Ruth the past few days in my morning devotions—a story of God’s acceptance of a person from outside of Israel right into the line of David.

Jesus himself warned the Jews of his day that a Roman centurion’s servant was welcome to the Father, and that (again in Matt. 8) “many will come from East and West and sit down at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, but the sons of the Kingdom (that is, the Jews) will be cast into outer darkness.” That does not sound like preferential treatment of a Chosen Nation!

Yes, the Bible tells the story of a Chosen Nation that received special revelation from God, and through which the Bible itself was transmitted to us. But the Chosen Nation was clearly not the only place God was at work around the world. Missionaries often discover that the Holy Spirit has preceded them. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, represent 300 different earlier documents, in addition to all of the Old Testament books. The Bible itself refers to many other documents outside of the Bible. Thus, the Bible freely admits that God is concerned about other nations and that His Holy Spirit is at work in the entire world.

Learning the real meaning of some verses is, as I have already mentioned, more important in some case than

others. Here is an even more serious case. For years I preached sermons on Isa 49:6, extolling it as the clearest example of the Great Commission in the Old Testament. Now I know it isn’t! To the Children of Israel in Babylon, who eagerly wanted to return to their land of Palestine, God says essentially, “It is relatively secondary that I should raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved of Israel to their land. I will make you a light to the nations. I want you to be my salvation to the ends of the earth.” That does sound like the Great Commission doesn’t it?

However, only fairly recently I discovered that the phrase “to the ends of the earth” was at that time in history merely the Hebrew way of referring to the ends of the plains of the Fertile Crescent. All of a sudden this phrase no longer meant to the rest of the planet, but specifically the extremes of the Hebrew known world.

Am I sad to find this out? Not really. However, the verse now has a very different and special meaning. In this verse God was not talking to the Jews (who were right then in captivity in Babylon, at the “ends of the flat earth plain”) about being messengers of His salvation to *the whole planet*. He was telling them that to get back to their land was not as important as being a saving force *to their very captors*, the Babylonians, there where they were at “the ends of the earth.” That was a much less attractive task!

In Pakistan I once spent six hours talking with the members of a seminary faculty representing about a half million Christians who are in many ways oppressed by the Muslim majority. I naturally expressed concern for the 97 percent Muslims in that country. At the end one of the professors wagged his finger in my face and said, “If you send missionaries to reach the Muslims we will go to the government and get them thrown out.” In other words, when Isa. 49:6 asks the

Jews to witness to their captors it is asking something very difficult, possibly more difficult than going to the ends of the earth literally.

Being relieved of my previous understanding of this verse did not in this case cause any real harm. Other passages have been more crucial.

For example, Calvin and Luther both took notice of Ps. 19:6 which speaks of the rising sun running its course from one end of heaven to the other. Both Calvin and Luther interpreted this to mean that Copernicus was wrong about the Earth going around the sun. Eventually, however, as humans found out more about God's world we realized that Copernicus was right: God had in fact set the Earth to revolve around the sun. Note, however, very few people may have looked back at Ps. 19:6 and realized that the Bible passage did not contradict that discovery, and that it merely describes what people actually see during a 24 hour period. The passage was not intended to speak of the mechanics of a round ball planet hanging in space they knew nothing about. Rather, *most people simply assumed the Bible was wrong.*

Thus, the very serious problem is that the on-looking world did not realize that Calvin and Luther had misinterpreted the Bible. The world has assumed—as have historians of science to this day—that the Bible itself had said something that turned out not to be true. They do not question Calvin's intelligence or his ability to interpret the Bible. Intelligent people in the world have become confident that the Bible cannot be trusted. *Thus, believing as we do in an inerrant Bible does not mean we should believe in inerrant interpretations!*

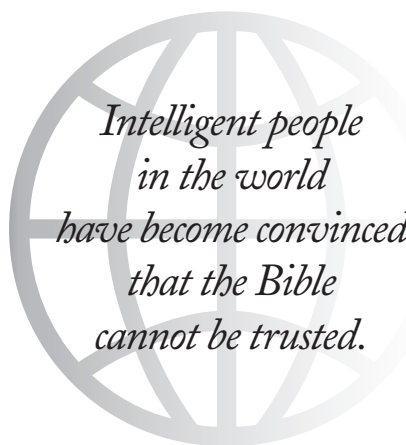
Let me conclude with one final, even more crucial and longstanding misunderstanding of the Bible. This verse is so important that I would have gladly spent my whole time on it, had I not been asked to give my personal testimony.

I refer to Genesis 1:1, which all my life until recently I have assumed—along with most casual readers of Genesis in English—had to do with the creation

of the *universe*, and that this would have been a fairly recent event.

Meanwhile, however, during my lifetime thousands of intelligent observers have also been studying the earth and have continued to dig up bones of strange, huge, violent creatures (most of which no longer exist) and which seem to have lived a very great time ago.

Even in my teens my Scofield Reference Bible had taken this apparent age of the earth into account by concluding that there was a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Scofield was also aware that the “formless and



void” phrase in verse two does not properly translate the Hebrew “tohu wa bohu,” which more precisely means “desolation and disorder.” He apparently did not realize that verse 1:1 could mean something very different from our usual English translations, namely “When God began,” and that the word “bara” (for *create*) does not mean “create out of nothing.” The Bible uses the same word for what a potter does in creating a vessel from pre-existing clay.

Thus, it is only one small step beyond Scofield to suppose that the many thousands of years of the “old earth” all came *before* Genesis 1:1, not in the middle of the single sentence that runs from 1:1 to 1:2.

Why is this important? Because, for one thing, it is not so easy to believe that when God created the universe, He began with a situation that could be called “destroyed and desolate.”

Today, however, the widely believed and Scofield-backed “gap” theory is seldom mentioned. More often people have gone to “long days.” They have concluded that the six days of creation in the first chapter of Genesis were longer than 24 hours—perhaps millions of years—and that the great age of the earth can handily fit into six elongated days.

However, for me the chief problem in inserting all of the old earth into the long days of Genesis 1 is that most of the old bones we have been digging up belonged to shockingly vicious and life-destroying creatures. If they were what was being created in these elongated days, why would Genesis 1 repeatedly say “and God saw that it was good,” or why would we read at the end of the chapter that neither man nor beast was carnivorous, but rather plant eating?

In this case the implications of the problem of interpretation have become so severe (and the protection of the veracity of the Bible so important) that, in sharp contrast to the gap theory and the long-day theory, there has in recent years been an explosion of interest in favor of simply denying any great age to all the millions of old bones that have been dug up. Proponents of this newer view say that the bones are not actually old at all, but that they only look old. To them, things like the Grand Canyon did not take many years to form, but were formed almost overnight as the result of a global flood. This position (coming over from the Seventh Day Adventists as recently as the 1930s) is called “Young Earth,” and draws on what is called “Flood Geology.”

However, the “Young Earth” concept is the laughingstock of the entire secular world simply because evidence is growing stronger every day that the old bones we have dug up really are old. Carbon 14 measurements have been joined by thirteen other ways of measuring time even more reliably and over much longer periods. We have now dug up nine hundred times as many forms of now extinct life as still exist on earth. All nine hundred, according to the “Young Earth” per-

spective, were created and died in the last six thousand years.

Now, this recently espoused “Young Earth” theory is a perfectly legitimate theory to discuss with pros and cons. There is some rationale for it. But notice, whether it is true or not, as with Calvin and Luther, if this interpretation is presented as the only possible meaning of the Bible and turns out to be wrong, then the Bible itself will be labeled wrong. I personally would much rather wonder if we have not for some time simply jumped to conclusions about the meaning of Genesis 1:1, reading back into it what we now know about the cosmos. Have we read into the Bible what we know the Bible simply did not address? If we have, we may unintentionally have concealed its real meaning.

There is a whole lot more to this perspective than can be explained here, but this is at least the gist of the situation.

It is very likely that at the time the book of Genesis came into being, people did not know that they were living on a round ball hanging in space. When they said, “to the ends of the earth” they were talking about their own known world. When they talked about “the whole world” they were talking about the world they knew, not about the entire planet. When they said the flood covered the world they were not talking about the entire planet.

Is this heresy? Recently my wife Barbara and I were at Wheaton for her 45th reunion. I was delighted to shake the hand of Russell Mixter, a very old man in his nineties, who in 1950 was a professor of Biology at Wheaton. Back then, he had concluded that when the Bible said “the whole world,” it referred only to the whole *known* world and that that was the extent of the Biblical flood. The ark thus contained all the animals in the area of the world to be destroyed, but not all of the other animals in the world, and certainly not dinosaurs 100 feet long weighing many tons. Wheaton College did not disagree with Mixter, and for the last 50 years Wheaton’s faculty has been allowed that latitude in the interpretation of the Bible.

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Thousands of intelligent investigators all over the world have concluded that the earth is old, not just six thousand years old. If they are right, I am asking the question “Does that indicate that the Bible is wrong?” Is it possible that the Bible has all along been the work of “holy men of God speaking as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” in words that usually both they and their hearers understood? We surely don’t believe the Bible was *dictated* by God, as has been alleged for the *Qur’an* and the *Book of Mormon*. We believe that it was written by human men inspired by God to write for human understanding in their time and place. That is why it behooves us to *understand Bible times* if we want to really understand the Bible and do it justice. We might like to think that God gave us a magical book full of all kinds of secret meanings that only cryptographers can discover. Would He have had a good reason to do that?

Now, the reason this issue is important to me and to a better understanding of the Christian mission is simple. If in a vastly earlier period of time before Genesis 1:1, Satan turned against God and distorted God’s good creation into the incredible suffering and violence we still see all throughout nature; if Satan has from that time been the perverter of microbes into deadly germs such that all forms of life suffer from microbiological attack; and if all this occurred before Genesis 1:1, *then the events of Genesis chapter one may well display the re-creation of plant-eating animals and humans in their original God-designed form*, and can be seen as a new beginning revealing God’s original intent, and a new beachhead intended to assist in the defeat of Satan and the restoration of all creation.

However, almost immediately, Satan (who already had a long crime record) also penetrated Eden and brought down the newly created humans and the new beginning of undistorted animal life. Ever since, humans and animals are born genetically perverted

along with all the rest of nature, the new forms of life created in God’s image in Genesis 1 having become victims of Satan. Now humans are in dire need themselves to be saved before they can work effectively with God in the defeat of Satan.

The Cross, then, was the turning point in the battle against Satan—although Satan may have thought he won. But the Cross was by no means the end of the battle. Turning points in a major struggle are terribly important. They are the basis of secure hope. But a war is not over until it is over.

We must ask, “Have people thought it was all over and that all we need to do now is to get saved and wait for heaven, not join any battle?” Once we are saved I believe we must understand that our mission is to participate all-out in an onslaught against Satan and his works, not lie back and await heaven. Basic to that onslaught are our commendable efforts in calling upon people to accept the Lordship and the Commission of Christ. *But that is merely getting people prepared for war.* The Bible still says, “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, *to destroy the works of the devil.*” I Jn. 3:8.

The immense tragedy is that the entire Christian world has been significantly duped by Satan, and has only vaguely understood this larger mission.

Nixon declared a war on cancer. Bill Gates is financing a war on malaria. But Calvin did not know about germs and I know of no theologian today—since germs were discovered—who believes the Christian mission includes seeking out the origins of cancer or heart disease or any other killer disease and killing off those Satanically-devised pathogens. We apparently leave that to the world and to the Orthodox Jews who have an unusually high concentration in these areas. It would appear that their intuitive theology is better than our Calvinistic theology.

I am old enough to recall the enormous transformation of America during WWII. The eleven million men and women who were sent overseas were not the only ones caught up in that all-out war; each and every civilian left behind was as well. It was no longer a peacetime situation. Crime dropped, and thousands of industries were transformed. Factories that once made cars now built tanks. Others that made nylon stocking now made nylon cords for parachutes. Still others made new things like ammunition, thousands and thousands of vehicles of strange new types, plus thousands of ships (six thousand of which went to the bottom in the Atlantic war alone).

The war against evil and against things that tear down our understanding of God is still going on. That much bigger war is not over. All over the earth people are dying prematurely in suffering and pain due to an onslaught from the microbiological world that we are only beginning to understand and that no one has understood theologically.

As I have said, nine out of ten Americans are pulled down to premature death, often in terrible pain and suffering. We spend billions on helping the sick but pennies on exterminating the causal pathogens. There is no money in that. And if, as some may assume, these attackers are part of God's intent, then our hands are tied.

So we get along. We keep busy doing interesting things. But our battles are primarily personal. We are not fighting in a time of war. As it has recently been put, "We have a very limp 'public theology.'" Isn't that true?

Our Evangelical mood is to refine our manners; to build our confidence, hope, self-esteem; to become "all God wants us to be" and to gain "the abundant life," without taking into account that when our names were *listed* in the Lamb's Book of Life, our earthly sojourn was decisively *enlisted* in an all-out war that knows nothing of the secondary or even trivial concerns which fill our lives. God have mercy.

Much of our worship today is minimally meaningful. We sing on and on,

"God is sooo goooood, He won't let anything bad haaaappen to me." We say that in a hundred different ways, trying to believe it, wanting to believe it. But we are really in a fog about reality; we are basically "whistling in the dark."

Meanwhile, we are actually in a horrendously active but mainly invisible God-sponsored war. Casualties of disease and curious accidents are very likely and are to be expected. In a war, suffering is not mysterious, needing books and devotionals to be written about it as a separate unconnected subject. It is not God that is inflicting the casualties, but the enemy. Let's not be confused about that and inactive in that war!

Each morning we need to show up for duty and be ready to choose the most effective way we can be involved. It is not to seek high pay or perks, but the war that must be won! Our lives and careers need to yield to that reality. And we cannot do it one family or one congregation at a time. We need to be organized on a far higher level. **IJFM**

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