

What Christians Believe about the Bible

A CONCISE
GUIDE
for Students

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and
Keith H. Reeves

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Preface

We are passionate about the Bible, which is why we are writing a book about it. In our experience, people want to know more about the Bible and to study it better, but they are not entirely sure what they think about the Bible itself. Moreover, after people read the Bible, they are not always sure about how they should interpret it. There are so many things to consider that they become overwhelmed. This feeling of being overwhelmed is understandable. It also occurs among those who study the Bible in institutions of higher education, where we have more than fifty years of combined experience in teaching college, university, and seminary students about the Bible.

We want to help people learn more about the Bible in terms of the wealth of what it has to say, how it reveals God to us, and how people have viewed and interpreted the Bible over the centuries. We do not want people to be ignorant of the Bible. On the contrary, we want them to study it and develop a mature understanding and interpretation of the biblical texts, learning to interpret them as historical texts as well as sacred Scripture. Part of the maturing process involves becoming familiar with the variety of views that Christians have about the Bible. We do not think that people should fear learning more about the Bible, its historical and literary contexts, and the ways that people have viewed it at different times and places in church history. Such an investigation helps the maturing process, both intellectually and spiritually. Indeed, we consider such study to be as helpful to the intellectual development of people as to their spiritual and moral development.

In his spare time (somewhat of a misnomer), Keith works as a real estate agent. The slogan often identified with real estate values is “location, location, location.” With regard to Christian beliefs and values, we promote the slogan “Bible, Bible, Bible.” We do not promote study of the Bible because we

think that the sheer quantity of study helps people mature. Indeed, sometimes those who know lots about the Bible have a very immature—if not distorted or immoral—understanding of it. Nor do we think that there is anything “magical” about biblical studies, though we do believe that God’s Holy Spirit aids people as they prayerfully study the Bible. In sum, we believe that critical, informed thinking as well as a devotional approach to the Bible aids people in all dimensions of their study of it and in the ways that God works in and through their lives as a result of their study.

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotes and references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). When other Bible translations are used, we will identify them. (A key of abbreviations for different Bible translations is included in the book.)

In this book, we try to present the Bible in all its relevance, intellectually and spiritually. We also present a variety of views about it in ways that are comprehensive and fair, reflective of centuries of Christian understandings about the Bible. In presenting our “concise guide” to “what Christians believe about the Bible,” we want to help people, especially students, develop their understanding, interpretation, and application of it. Indeed, it is our hope that people share the passion we have for the Bible and the divinely inspired revelation it represents.

Don Thorsen and Keith H. Reeves
August 2011

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We also want to thank Azusa Pacific University, the academic institution where we both teach. In our research and writing, Don was aided by the university's library, writers' retreat, and doctoral studies grant for a research assistant. Thanks go to Matthew Sperrazza, who served in the latter capacity. Keith was aided by a sabbatical leave he received from the university. Colleagues who helped and encouraged us throughout the writing project include Paul Gray, John Park, Kay Smith, Roger White, Karen Winslow, Enrique Zone, and especially Steve Wilkens.

Don wants to thank his daughters, Liesl, Heidi, and Dana. They continue to be friends as well as family, encouraging him in writing and in other ways. May the Bible continue to be the divinely inspired compass for their lives, as it has been for them in the past. Special thanks go to his oldest daughter, Liesl, to whom Don dedicates this book. Blessings!

Keith wishes to thank his daughters, Megan, Melanie, and Molly, who have patiently endured and maybe sometimes wondered what their Dad does in his spare time. Thanks go to his parents, Don and Genevieve Reeves. (Thanks, Mom, for reading me those Bible stories when I was a kid.) Special thanks go to his wife, Karen, who has lovingly, wisely, and patiently stuck with him the last thirty-three years.

Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| ASV | American Standard Version |
| AV | Authorized Version |
| BCE | Before the Common Era, or Before the Christian Era; same numbering as BC (“before Christ”) |
| CE | Common Era, or Christian Era; same numbering as AD (Anno Domini, Latin, “in the year of the/our Lord”) |
| KJV | King James Version |
| NAE | National Association of Evangelicals |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible |
| NCC | National Council of Churches |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NKJV | New King James Version |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |
| RV | Revised Version |
| TNIV | Today’s New International Version |



INTRODUCTION



We Are All Students of the Bible

Christians have long praised the people in the town of Bereoa for their study of the Bible. According to the book of Acts, the apostle Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to many in Jewish synagogues throughout the Roman Empire. Some were receptive to Paul’s preaching; others were not. However, the Jews in Bereoa were distinguished for their receptivity to the gospel and for their eager examination of “the Scriptures”—the sacred writings of the Bible. Acts 17:11 says, “These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so.” The Bereoeans were receptive both spiritually and intellectually to the gospel that Paul proclaimed to them.

The Bereoeans were not willing to believe Paul based solely on his authority. They knew that clever, charismatic speakers can be misleading, especially those who are from out of town. The Bereoeans also knew the Jewish Scriptures (which became the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament); they based their knowledge of God and salvation on them. If they were to welcome Paul’s gospel, then it needed to be investigated in light of truth that God had already revealed to them. The book of Acts does not specify the particular Scriptures the Bereoeans studied. In fact, neither the canon of the Jewish Scriptures nor the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) had yet been established. But Scriptures were widely available to the Jewish synagogues, and the Bereoeans faithfully studied them in order to discern the truth of the gospel Paul preached.

Not only did the Bereans investigate the Scriptures, but they also did it on a daily basis. The Bereans' determination as much as their spirituality has been praised by Christians. Both the quantity and quality of their investigation of the Scriptures have been a motivation, as well as a role model, for those who seek truth about God, salvation, and other matters pertaining to the Christian life. We begin this book with reference to the Bereans because we think that they remain exemplars for the kind of Bible study that we encourage people to undertake.

In a sense, we are all students of the Bible who read, reflect, and sometimes meditate on what it says. As students, we should do our best to understand, embody, and apply its teachings. Like the Bereans, we should focus on both how we study the Bible and our commitment to that task.

■ Challenges to Studying the Bible

There are many ways that people study the Bible, which we would reasonably expect. Some read the Bible devotionally; others read it casually; still others read it to disprove the Bible. How people read the Bible depends a great deal on the expectations they bring to their study of it. When they read the Bible with faith that, in one way or another, it represents divinely inspired revelation from God, their study tends to be more open, agreeable, and desirous of what is contained therein. When people read the Bible in the context of prayer, they expect that God's Holy Spirit will be at work in aiding, illuminating, and empowering their intimacy with God and their application of the Bible. Christians tend to read it with some sense of expectancy of—by God's grace—what they may learn, of how they may become more like Jesus, and of how they may love God and others better for having studied the Bible.

Christians often study the Bible earnestly, and some have dedicated their lives to understanding and applying it to the needs of people. Christian scholars and pastors, for example, have methodically studied the Bible for centuries. Those who followed have benefited from the studiousness of their predecessors. Some have studied the Bible in scholarly ways that have greatly comforted, guided, and encouraged those who read their work; others have studied it in ways that have caused people to question, doubt, and reject the Bible and what it says about God and salvation. The cumulative effect has led people today to realize that the Bible cannot be interpreted in simplistic ways, hoping that a plain and obvious meaning of the biblical texts will jump out at those who read them. We want to help people interpret the Bible better, but in the long run they need to take responsibility for doing the needed work of interpretation.

Some meanings of the biblical texts are plain and obvious. It is a grievous mistake, however, to think that all biblical teaching is instantly recognizable; the more Christians study the Bible, the more they know that interpretation requires intellectual and spiritual discernment. A mature understanding of the Bible requires dedication, methodical study, and thoughtful reflection in order to discern its truth and meaning. Although Christians may appeal to what they describe as the evident truth of the Bible, those who have studied it extensively know that properly interpreting and understanding the biblical texts takes time and effort. They may learn a great deal from pastors and scholars who aid them in the interpretive process. But they ought not to rely on the endeavors of others without doing their own due diligence in “rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).¹

■ **Ways to Study the Bible**

There are many ways to become more effective students of the Bible. Individually, people can undertake careful, systematic studies. They can read the Bible more, use study Bibles and other interpretive aids, memorize it, and apply it more and more to their lives. People can also develop the study of the Bible through participation in collective contexts: church services, Christian education classes, midweek fellowships, and other groups that focus on Bible study. Some parachurch organizations are dedicated entirely to in-depth, group-oriented, prolonged biblical studies. All of these methods greatly benefit people committed to understanding and interpreting the Bible.

Another way to become more proficient in biblical studies is taking Bible courses in a college, university, or seminary. Most often, though not always, such courses are taught in Christian higher education. Biblical studies courses provide students with methods and skills to interpret the Bible in ways unimaginable to those who are untutored in its study. In our experience, students are spiritually inspired and intellectually enlightened at discovering depths of meaning in the biblical texts that they may not have found without the tutelage of those who have committed their lives to academic study of the Bible.

Although Christians sometimes view their study of the Bible as an act of worship in interpreting sacred Scriptures, we think that there are advantages—indeed blessings—for those who critically investigate the biblical texts, utilizing formal disciplines for unlocking deeper understanding of them. To be sure, some Christians may feel that such rigor does an injustice to the spiritual and

1. In the King James Version, 2 Timothy 2:15 says, “rightly dividing the word of truth”—a common phrase among Christians, emphasizing the need for proper interpretation of the Bible.

ministerial heart of the Bible. But academic studies of it are not afraid of what critical investigations of the Bible may reveal. If all truth is God's truth, then Christians ought not to be afraid of any truth about the Bible. Of course, the Bible ought not to be looked at only as texts to be analyzed and assessed. It remains sacred Scripture, which represents a special means by which God encounters those who prayerfully read and study the Bible. Devotional and critical studies ought to be considered complementary, rather than contradictory, interpretive approaches.

Students may find themselves stumped by questions about the Bible that they never imagined—much less studied—prior to taking courses in a college, university, or seminary. When something is studied in-depth, questions often arise that are uncomfortable and not easily understood or resolved. The same is true with study of the Bible. Church history is filled with progressively difficult questions that people—both Christians and non-Christians—have asked about the Bible, including, for example, questions about its authority, inspiration, and trustworthiness. People have raised such questions since the beginning of Christianity. But the questions seem to be cumulative. Since some questions are not easily resolved, additional questions are added that make the interpretive process increasingly complex and challenging.

Questions and concerns about the nature of the Bible seemed to grow exponentially during the nineteenth century, with the rise of historical and critical methods of biblical interpretation. No longer was it assumed that the Bible is best interpreted from the standpoint of Christian faith and presuppositions of divine inspiration. Instead, people wondered what would happen if the Bible was interpreted as is any other book. If people no longer presumed divine inspiration, or if they interpreted the Bible as a book of human origin, how would their interpretations change? It became increasingly evident that historical and critical methods of interpretation raised many questions about the biblical texts—problems that previous interpreters had largely overlooked or rationalized as unimportant relative to the overall contributions of the Bible.

Once Christians as well as non-Christians became more willing to talk about contested biblical texts, it was unclear what consequences would come about due to increased questioning. Issues of historical accuracy and the internal consistency of biblical texts were raised. Questions also arose over ethical perspectives found in the Bible, which people increasingly found problematic, including slavery, polytheism, polygamy, treatment of women, genocide, and so on. A host of additional challenges were made, based on the presuppositions of scientific method that interpreters brought to the biblical texts. For example, ancient Christian interpreters often overlooked difficult-to-understand

passages—that is, passages that were not easily reconciled logically or with extrabiblical information found in history and science. Now, possible errors became visible throughout the Bible, threatening the belief that it was exempt from such historical and scientific investigations.

In addition to interpretive questions, other questions arose about the Bible itself. How did it come into existence? What were the criteria by which the biblical canon was determined? In what sense is the Bible authoritative? In what sense is it inspired? Is the Bible true? In what sense is it true? To what degree should historical and critical methods of biblical interpretation shape our understanding of the Bible? What of other modern and postmodern questions that arise about it? To what degree is the Bible relevant today?

To some people, these questions seem commonplace. However, to people for whom the Bible plays a central role (or those who want it to play such a role), these are life-and-death issues. It could even be said that they are eternal-life-and-death issues. So the stakes are high with regard to how the Bible ought to be understood theologically and how it is best interpreted.

■ **A Concise Guide for Students**

We wrote this book primarily for students in colleges, universities, and seminaries who take courses in biblical and theological studies. Of course, though we want to help students, we believe that our book will be of help to anyone interested in learning more about the Bible. So long as readers are committed to developing greater depth of understanding in interpreting the Bible and in integrating it theologically into their lives, they will find this book to be insightful and constructive.

The original motivation for this book came from conversations we had about questions and concerns that students raised in our courses. Keith teaches biblical studies courses, and he focuses on the interpretation of the Bible. Thus he discusses issues of genre, historical and literary contexts, and other considerations in biblical interpretation. As Keith teaches principles and methods of Bible study, students invariably ask questions about the nature of the Bible itself and not just about interpreting the particular texts under investigation. From his perspective, the questions are relevant and important for students to consider in the development of their beliefs (or theology) about the Bible. However, such questions are complex and require more time to discuss than can be easily accommodated in every Bible course that he teaches. It would be helpful to Keith if students read a concise introduction to the Bible that talks about theological issues such as biblical authority, divine inspiration, and the trustworthiness of the Bible. Such issues could

then be discussed in class without having to distract interminably from the task of biblical interpretation.

Likewise, Don teaches theological studies courses, and he focuses on the kinds of theological or doctrinal investigations that deal with biblical authority, divine inspiration, and the trustworthiness of the Bible. These are “big picture” issues that do not generally require the same rigor of hermeneutics (from Greek *hermēneutikē*, “interpretation” or “rules of interpretation”) found in biblical studies courses. Yet Don wants his students to realize that theological conclusions do not arise plainly and obviously from the biblical texts; they take hard work and familiarity with methods of biblical interpretation. A degree of expertise in historical and critical methods of interpretation is required for the affirmations Christians make about the Bible. He does not want students to make affirmations of belief without an awareness, first, of the biblical exegesis (from Greek *exēgēsis*, “interpretation”) required to establish them, and second, of diversity in the theological conclusions Christians reach. Too often, students assume that their beliefs and values are the only ones or the only right ones. They may do this because they have never thought through their beliefs or because they have never questioned the beliefs handed down to them by parents, pastors, or churches they attended. Sometimes students are naive about alternative views about the Bible or even intentionally ignore them, which is the root of much ignorance. Even worse, students sometimes judge or condemn alternative views, not because they necessarily reject the arguments of others, but primarily because they are different. Part of Christian maturity and academic discovery includes familiarity with and tolerance of the views of others, even when they differ from one’s own views.

We wanted to write a book that would meet the needs of students in both of our classes. The book would help Keith’s biblical studies students because they could read about the variety of views that Christians have about the theological nature of the Bible. It would help students establish a baseline of definitions and viewpoints, so that constructive discussion would occur in the development of their biblical beliefs and values. Likewise, the book would help Don’s theological studies students because they would read about the variety of views that Christians have about rightly interpreting the Bible. It would help them to become more critical in their understanding of multiple layers of meaning found in the biblical texts, requiring awareness of different genres and their historical and literary contexts. Once students accept that Christians do not always view the Bible and its interpretation the same way, it helps them become more knowledgeable, civil, and, potentially, cooperative in working constructively with other Christians, acknowledging that we do not always think, speak, and act the same way.

■ Differences of Opinion

Christians too often cringe at differences of opinion they have about the Bible and its interpretation, as well as a myriad of other beliefs, values, and practices related to the Bible. One approach to such differences is to ignore them. In this instance, Christians either live in oblivion or they spend their time withdrawing from other Christians (and possibly all of society). Another approach is to attack them. When attacks occur, which may involve an attitude of judgmentalism at best or persecution at worst, it is unfortunate for Christians, churches, and society as a whole. Christians should first try to understand those who differ from them, lest they unnecessarily and unlovingly disregard them.

Some Christians claim that they possess “truth” and not mere “opinions” or “points of view.” According to them, truth is verifiable through reason and experience—that is, through logical reasoning and biblical evidence that involves conformity with reality and fact-based beliefs. These claims include propositional statements about the Bible and other theological affirmations. The problem, however, is that the Bible, God, salvation, and other spiritual matters do not easily lend themselves to rational and empirical verification. Opinions, though, are thought to be of lesser quality, relying on argumentation but lacking certainty. But claims to certainty are not always a reliable guide to discerning truth. People sin, commit civil crimes, and deny the existence of God while claiming certainty about the rightness of their actions. So, certainty alone does not guarantee truth, much less certainty about righteousness and justice. Moreover, what happens when multiple Christians claim to speak truth yet differ with one another? Authoritarian claims—even those by Christian leaders and scholars who are greatly respected—may sway some people some of the time, but can they convince all people all the time?

Opinions are what we refer to when people in general, and Christians in particular, have different beliefs, values, and practices, including those about the Bible. Church history is not monolithic in the sense that Christians have been in agreement at all times and in all places about the Bible and its interpretation. That does not mean that there has not been agreement, since there have been significant amounts of agreement about the facts of Christianity, including biblical facts. But Christians have not always interpreted those facts the same way. To be sure, some opinions have been more persuasive and pervasive in church history. Still, Christians have differed, and it is important for students of the Bible to be aware of *why* such differences of opinion occur, especially if they want to become more mature in their own beliefs, values, and practices.

Differences of opinion are not bad in and of themselves. Even the apostle Paul had differences of opinion with other Christian leaders, including his longtime partner Barnabas. In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas disagreed with each other over whether to bring a onetime colleague, John, called Mark (or John Mark), on their next missionary journey. Because John Mark had abandoned them on a previous ministerial trip, Paul did not want him to come. However, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance. Acts 15:39 says, “The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company.” So Paul traveled with Silas, and Barnabas traveled with John Mark. Both had successful ministries according to Acts, yet they did so having differed dramatically in their opinions of what was best for their ministry.

Differing beliefs, values, and practices among Christians are not necessarily wrong, bad, or disadvantageous to God, God’s mission, and churches. Paul insists on diversity in unity in his analogy of Christians as the “body of Christ.” In talking about the community of believers, Paul says the following:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

. . . As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:4–6, 20–27

Often Christians have interpreted this analogy as describing a local church. God provides churches with believers and other resources to fulfill the various needs of God’s mission within a particular church context. No one within the church ought to lord it over others, even when the others are perceived as being weaker, less honorable, or somehow inferior.

However, the analogy of Christians as the body of Jesus Christ can also apply to churches worldwide. Christians in different denominations, national settings, and cultural and linguistic contexts do not necessarily thwart the reign of God. The diversity may, in fact, contribute to the overall strength of mission that Christians and churches perform in the world on behalf of God

and God's Holy Spirit working through them. Although they share many of the same beliefs, values, and practices, Christians and churches do not share them all. Yet God's mission works through them.

Certainly, points arise where Christians and churches go too far in straying from biblical and historical boundaries that identify Christianity. There are limits—spiritual and other—to what it means to be faithful followers of God. Moreover, the Bible warns us about false teachers and prophets (see, for example, Jer. 23:16; Matt. 7:15; Rom. 16:17–18). But the mere presence of diversity and differences of opinion does not necessarily signal a boundary Christians may not step over. Part of the process of discerning God's will among various beliefs, values, and practices has to do with, first, becoming aware of the diversity. Judgments ought not to be made without first examining and evaluating the views of others in ways that are fair and not prematurely dismissed due to misunderstanding or lack of information. Second, once people know the diversity of opinions that Christians and churches have, they may be more discerning, effective, and redemptive in evaluating Christian teachings. There is more than one way for Christians to be biblical, faithful, effective followers of God. God uses the particular gifts, talents, skills, temperaments, and even the quiriness of people. Homogeneity (or sameness) among Christians is not desirable, much less possible, in the richly diverse world God created.

One of the reasons we gave this book the title *What Christians Believe about the Bible* is our desire to teach people about the diversity of Christian beliefs, especially those pertaining to the Bible. Although hearing too much information at once can be confusing, people benefit in the long run if they study views of the Bible different from their own. This is especially true for those who take Bible courses in colleges, universities, and seminaries. Contrary to some fears people have, new learning can be helpful, and it is essential for those who want to develop a more mature understanding and interpretation of the Bible. So, in order for readers of this book to become more convinced of their own beliefs, they need to learn about both historic and contemporary views of the Bible. Being introduced to alternative opinions may help them sharpen their own understanding and application.

New learning can be challenging, even threatening. People do not generally like to be forced out of their comfort zone of long-held beliefs, regardless of how thoroughly such beliefs have been investigated and assessed. But new learning may also bring clarity, insight, or helpful alternatives previously unknown. If Christians want to develop their study of the Bible, then learning about what Christians believe about the Bible provides an opportunity they ought not to ignore. To be sure, there are always risks when people openly and honestly study complex issues. But we consider it worth the risk because the

benefits are too great to pass up. So we wrote this book about what Christians believe about the Bible.

■ **Induction, Deduction, and the Bible**

We do not know many people who immediately warm up to the topic of logic. This tepidness is regrettable, since even an elementary knowledge and use of logical reasoning can greatly enhance both their lives and their study of the Bible. For the sake of this book, we want to talk about the logical use of induction and deduction in relationship to biblical and theological studies.

Those who have studied the Bible in academic settings may have heard the phrase “inductive Bible study” or “inductive Bible study method.” Induction has to do with the gathering of facts, investigating them, and formulating conclusions or general concepts that summarize research of the data. In particular, inductive Bible study has to do with looking at all of the relevant data in the biblical texts. For example, if people want to investigate the meaning of “covenant,” then they would look at all the verses in the Bible that deal directly or indirectly with covenants. They would find references to covenants in both the Old and New Testaments. After investigating the biblical data, they would make informed conclusions or state general concepts that encapsulate the whole of what the Bible says about covenants. Of course, conclusions are not final, since induction is concerned with thorough research and remains open to new data and insights that may provide greater insight into the nature and implications of covenants in the Bible.

Similar inductive logic is used in day-to-day life decisions. For example, let us imagine a group of friends trying to decide what movie to go to. They begin the decision-making process by talking about what movies are available in local theaters and what the starting times are. The friends may then enter into a discussion of the kinds of movies and actors they want to see or what kinds of movies and actors they have seen before, so that everyone has a greater chance to see the type of movie they enjoy. After having discussed the relevant data, they then make conclusions (or a single conclusion) about the movie they want to see. Of course, if new data arises, for example, the movie they want to see has already sold out, then they need to be willing to alter their decision. But their decision making relied on the inductive gathering of data relevant to their movie selection.

Although Christians tend to emphasize the importance of inductive Bible study, it is incorrect to think that deduction does not also play a role. Deduction explains or proves the conclusions or general concepts determined by inductive reasoning and research. So, with regard to the study of covenants in the Bible,

deductive reasoning is used to explain how the conclusion (or conclusions) was determined from the investigation used to reach it. Deductive reasoning may also be called on to prove or give an apologetic (or defense) for why the conclusion was reached. Syllogistic reasoning is a type of argumentation used to convince others—for example, when a proposition (or conclusion) is inferred from two other propositions (or premises). Such logical argumentation is thought to provide necessarily true conclusions based on the rules of logic. Whereas induction is more invested in gathering information for the sake of raising the probability of being right based on repeated observations, deduction is more invested in establishing with certainty that a conclusion is right. With regard to the friends' decision about the movie they watch, deduction has to do with explaining or proving why one movie was chosen, rather than another, to those less convinced about the choice of movie.

An inductive approach to Bible study is advocated because, among other reasons, it emphasizes doing the investigative work by oneself, without relying too much on the research and expertise of others. This is not intended to downplay the importance of such resources but to play up the importance of interpreting the Bible for oneself. Induction also wants the interpreter of the Bible to remain open to new learning and insights that may be different from previous learning and insights, which may have been shaped by the conclusions of others but that do not fit with the facts. In other words, everyone is shaped by their life experiences—who they are and what they have heard, experienced, and read. Their background is invaluable in helping them understand the Bible and the world. However, it is possible that previous learning and life experiences that make up the cultural context they live in may be unhelpful or misleading in gaining greater understanding of biblical texts. So the inductive Bible study method wants students to both learn about the texts for themselves and be open to new learning and insights in their interpretation of the Bible.

Theological and biblical studies use inductive and deductive reasoning. Whereas biblical studies tend to focus more on data from the Bible, theological studies focus on the Bible and on other relevant data that help to develop a more holistic Christian worldview. Theological studies are open to church tradition, critical thinking, and relevant experience. Such investigations help people grow spiritually and discern greater truth about God, themselves, others, and the world.

■ **Faith Integration and Apologetics**

Although faith integration is not at the forefront of what we are trying to accomplish in this book, the contextualization and application of the Bible is

inextricably bound up with what we want to teach students. We do not talk about biblical and theological studies for their own sakes. On the contrary, we undertake such studies so that we might learn more about God, grow spiritually in relationship with God, and then live more Christlike, loving lives toward God and others. Thus the practical application of our biblical and theological studies represents the eventual goal of our efforts.

One of the reasons people sometimes resist the academic study of the Bible is fear—rational or irrational—that such studies lead to a deconstructing of the Bible that in turn leads to the deconstructing or loss of faith. To be sure, people’s faith may be challenged by increased learning about the Bible. However, growth, including spiritual growth, often seems to involve some kind of “growing pain.” And the disdain of opportunities for greater understanding afforded through academic study of the Bible may be even more dangerous. It is our opinion that people’s faith will more likely be threatened if their knowledge of the Bible remains limited, naive, or possibly corrupted by false teaching. How will they know for sure unless they study the Bible more for themselves? We think that people’s experiences of God, salvation, and the Christian life are aided when they learn more about the Bible in every dimension of what it has to say.

Faith integration is related to the inductive nature of both biblical and theological studies. Faith integration may occur in many ways. It occurs individually as people develop knowledge of the Bible and other aspects of life in order to be more relevant and effective in their decision making. Faith integration also occurs academically as biblical and theological studies are combined with interdisciplinary studies to discover knowledge that may be integrated, applied, and taught in ways that advance Christian spirituality and academic knowledge. The two are not in conflict; people know and love God with their minds, hearts, souls, and strength (see Mark 12:28–31). They conflict only when truth is distorted by sin, ignorance, or other aspects of finite human life. In practice, Christians are all too happy to apply the sciences, behavioral sciences, humanities, and other academic studies when they offer personal help—for example, in medicine, technology, music, arts, movies, television, and so on. Unfortunately, people may attack the very sciences and arts that they use on a daily basis if they think that such integration conflicts with teachings in the Bible. Discernment and wisdom are needed in order to have integrity with regard to how the various disciplines of knowledge are integrated into a Christian worldview. In our opinion, an emphasis on faith integration is a positive, hopeful way of approaching the Bible. It encourages greater knowledge of the world, the Bible, and our interdependent relationships with one another. Faith integration wants to learn as much about the Bible as possible,

seeing its interconnectedness with all aspects of life. Such integration helps people spiritually and in developing a holistic Christian worldview.

Apologetics is another goal of biblical and theological studies. Apologetics has to do with the defense of the truth of Christianity—of the Bible, church, Christians, and their ministries. Such efforts are needed lest Christianity become marginalized, and possibly persecuted, intellectually and in other ways. Because apologetics are self-defense oriented, they are heavily invested in being right and in showing how others are wrong. Deductive arguments are often used to debate with others and to show the truth of Christianity in contrast to alternate worldviews. Despite the legitimacy and necessity of apologetics, this book is more involved in faith integration. We do not write in order to point out who is right and who is wrong; we will let readers decide for themselves. Instead we are concerned with showing a commonsense approach to biblical studies that anyone can easily—yet critically—follow, and showing the variety of theological conclusions that Christians have reached based on their study of the Bible. As such we want to broaden rather than narrow Christians' understanding of the Bible. We think that Christians suffer more from narrow understanding than from a lack of apologetic expertise. To be sure, apologetics have their place in Christianity. But our concern is more with advancing the knowledge and applicability of biblical and theological studies through the integration of faith in all aspects of life.

■ **Modernism and Postmodernism**

One of the challenges to biblical studies is the growing realization that people bring more than the facts of the Bible to their interpretation of it. They may set aside Bible study aids, commentaries, and other resources that prematurely influence their interpretive process. But is it possible to undertake an entirely objective and unbiased—either consciously or unconsciously—approach to biblical interpretation? The Enlightenment, also known as modernism, emphasized that objectivity was possible and that it was a goal of rational and empirical investigation. Modernists also thought that, in the Christian study of the Bible, it was possible to find explicitly the meaning of every biblical text, which conveyed universal truth applicable to people at all times and in all places. Christians accepted these assumptions about objective truth advocated by modernism even though they rejected modernism's conclusions, especially those critical of religious authority. Incongruously, Christians wanted to do their biblical and theological studies in accordance with modern assumptions and methods, even though the same assumptions and methods were used to debunk Christianity and its truth claims.

The rise of postmodernism has complicated things intellectually for Christians because of its challenge to the legitimacy of making truth claims based on rational and empirical criteria without acknowledging personal, cultural, and other influences that affect people's knowledge. Although postmodernism will be discussed more in later chapters, it is skeptical of propositionally stated truth claims that are thought to be legitimated through rational and empirical evidence. According to postmodernism, truth involves more than argumentation that appeals to rational and empirical evidence; claims to truth are more complex, more influenced by personal, cultural, and other components, than modernists are willing to admit. Given the complexity of making truth claims, postmodernists argue that people may need to become more humble and self-aware with regard to the certainty of propositional truth claims they make, including those having to do with the Bible.

If we think of the group of friends making a decision about where to attend a movie, they did more than look at the facts about the what, when, and where of the movies. They brought to their decision-making process a host of personal and cultural backgrounds that undoubtedly shaped their interpretation of the movie data they gathered. Some friends like drama or romance movies, while others like adventure, science fiction, or horror movies. Although they had to deal with empirical evidence, their reading, evaluation, and application of the data reflected personal background and cultural influences that may have powerfully shaped their interpretation of movie options and their contribution to the group's decision. Likewise, postmodernism questions the personal and cultural intangibles that influence people's interpretation of facts, even those of the Bible. No facts are thought to be so objective, value neutral, or plain and obvious that they preclude the influence of personal and cultural factors on their interpretation, valuation, and application of the Bible. So, as we proceed in our study of what Christians believe about the Bible, we will need to reference both modern and postmodern concerns when discussing how Christians understand and interpret the text.

■ What Christians Believe about the Bible

Although Bible study can become quite complex, we think that a commonsense approach to biblical interpretation coupled with a theological discussion of Christian views of the Bible will be of immense help to those who undertake serious, thoughtful study. Biblical studies students will benefit from a clear introduction to interpretive methods that include consideration of genres, historical contexts, and literary sources. They will also benefit from a discussion of theological issues that invariably arise among students, pertaining to

the Bible's authority, inspiration, and trustworthiness. Such issues are not always discussed in biblical studies courses because they can distract from the interpretive process at hand or because such discussions are not immediately relevant to inductive Bible study.

Likewise, theological studies students will benefit from the discussion of interpretive methods because they may not be sufficiently aware of them as they study theology. Regrettably, books in theology often presume awareness of historical and critical methods of biblical interpretation but do not draw connections between theological discussions and their biblical foundations. Sometimes students know the connections but have trouble formally making or remembering them. Not all students of theology have been trained in basic principles of biblical interpretation, and that inexperience leaves them unprepared to make key connections between the Bible and theology.

Biblical and theological studies are inextricably bound up with each other, though sometimes Christians keep them separated. Perhaps they are unwilling to do the due diligence that would prevent the Bible and theological studies from becoming bifurcated, or somehow isolated from one another, in gaining greater insight into Christian beliefs, values, and practices. Certainly it is difficult to keep in mind every possible consideration, since the study of the Bible is complex, and it is difficult to juggle every one of them. However, the lack of such knowledge has led Christians and others into ignorance—intentional or unintentional—of one another's views or opinions. Since ignorance can lead to misunderstanding, and misunderstanding can lead to judgmentalism or worse, students of the Bible ought to avoid such ignorance, lack of understanding of the opinions of others, and missed opportunities for learning, cooperation, and application of the Bible.

We are big fans of faith integration, which contributes to biblical Christianity through the interdisciplinary study and application of ideas that make the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ more effective. We believe that God gives the increase to our labors, as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 3:6. So, like the apostle Paul, we are to plant and water seeds of effective biblical and theological studies; it is God who gives the increase to our faith integration through such studies. Apologetics are important because Christians need to defend their beliefs, values, and practices, but those who promote faith integration have more creative and wide-ranging opportunities to advance God's will in the world.

In talking about what Christians believe about the Bible, we begin by presenting a brief history of the Bible. One of the challenges that people sometimes run into is that they have never thought much about how the Bible came into existence. While most of them would not say that the Bible just “dropped out

of heaven,” they seem to function as if it did. When people hear of historical and critical questions about the Bible, they are tempted to react negatively, since it seems disrespectful to discuss such historical matters unless it is to praise and promote confirmation of biblical teachings. Yet Christians miss out on a richness and depth of meaning that comes after having learned even a little about the historical development of the Bible. Once a person begins to learn about its archaeological background, interaction with multiple cultures and languages, and literary sources, such a person may never want to cease learning about the history of the Bible.

Next we will talk about a commonsense approach to biblical interpretation. Special emphasis will be given to learning about different genres or types of literature, which is essential to interpreting what the Bible says. It is an overstatement to say that “context is everything,” but the historical and literary context of what is said in the Bible is crucial to interpreting it. So an additional chapter will include study of the literary context of the Bible, investigating sources of what it says and the Bible’s corresponding influence on others.

We will conclude with a survey of theological issues Christians are perennially concerned with. They include the authority of the Bible, its inspiration, and its trustworthiness. Christians have a variety of views about these issues, and the particular view they have strongly shapes the way they understand God, the church, and the Christian life. We ought not to scoff at such differences of opinion but rather try to understand them. We may learn something; we may not. We should at least learn how to communicate better and possibly cooperate with one another in becoming better students of the Bible and in applying it, by the grace of God.