

Simply Christian  
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### **Course outline, book and other materials**

[Simply Christian](#) by N. T. Wright  
Also recommend [Simply Jesus](#).

## **Gathering, Prayer**

### **Introduction**

As people gather, give them Biblical Literacy Quiz.

#### **Review:**

- Four echoes of a voice: justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty.
- God: Where is he? God's space is not the same as our space. How do they overlap: Pantheism, deism, and Christian view.
- The story of Israel: Exile and restoration. Four themes in the OT: King, Temple, Torah, and new creation.
- Isaiah (in line with some Psalms and other passages, spoke of God's kingdom as the time when:
  - a) God's promises and purposes would be fulfilled.
  - b) Israel would be rescued from pagan oppression.
  - c) Evil would be judged, especially the evil regimes.
  - d) God would bring about a new reign of justice and peace.
- What did Jews expect from their Messiah?
  - He would fight the battle against Israel's enemies, specifically the Romans.
  - He would rebuild, or at least cleanse and restore, the Temple.
  - He would reestablish the monarchy as in the days of David and Solomon.
  - He would be God's representative to Israel, and Israel's representative to God.
- Jesus not the expected Messiah.
- In spite of that, the Christian message had surprising power and grew.
- The Holy Spirit. If we have the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, that is the place where heaven and earth meet—God's new Temple.
- What does this all mean to a Christian? How do we respond?
  - Worship
  - Prayer

**The Book God Breathed.** The Bible is a big book and is full of big stories that have big, complex characters. They have big ideas about them, including some big ideas about themselves. It's about God and greed and grace; about life, lust, laughter, and loneliness. It's about birth, beginnings and betrayal; about siblings, squabbles, and sex; about power and prayer and prison and passion. It has intimate stories, and epic journeys. And, that's only Genesis.

It is a huge sprawling book. Think about the incredible number of characters in the book. A life sized mural of all of them would be a very long mural indeed.

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When you pick it up, do you ever think that you have the most famous book in the world, the best seller of all time. And, more importantly a book of incredible power to change lives, to change communities, and even to change the world. It's done it before, and it can do it again. I can hear the objections—only God gets to change the world The Bible is just a book—how can it have power like that?

It is a strange thing, and why the Bible is nonnegotiable in the Christian faith. It is a vital, central element in Christian faith and living. "You can't do without it, even though too many Christians have forgotten what to do with it." Somehow, God seems to have delegated (if you think of God as a manager) at least some of the things he intends to do in the work to this book. There are lots of metaphors that sort of work—writing a will with instructions on what to do with an estate, a composer writing a symphony for people to play, a dramatist writing a play, or the story so far in the book of life that God is writing.

The nature of its importance is assuredly why there are so many fights about it. There are as many battles about the Bible as there are battles within the Bible. In the early history of the Covenant church, there were huge fights over the nature of the atonement causing vitriolic arguments, church splits, and lots of bad blood. To us, it seems like a tempest in a teapot.

Each variety of Christianity has its own way of reading the Bible, and is nourished and sustained by that reading. And each, in theory at least, tries to put into practice the lessons it learns.

One might ask, "So what, does it matter?"

Yes it does. You don't need to a student of the history of Christianity to think of examples of ways the Bible was read which effectively muzzled, even led to injustice and even war. Slavery in this country is a classic example. There are lots of others. Some segments of Christianity have a book which is powerful in thousands of ways and they use to justify one or two things. A classic example are the sects of Christianity that are snake handlers base that practice on two verses in the NT. "17And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." Mark 16:17-18. "19See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you." Luke 10:19. <slide with web site>

Books have been written, very successful books I might add, based on one verse. The most obvious example is this verse: "11For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." Jeremiah 29:11. The book, is of course, The Prayer of Jabez. It sold 9 million copies, making Bruce Wilkerson a rich man.

<Additional examples from your experience?>

Not letting the Bible do all the things it's capable of is a bit like a reading every other page in a book and expecting to understand it. Or like playing a piano with your fingers tied together.

<Score the Literacy quiz.>

**What is the Bible?** As Christians we know that it is divided into 2 parts, the OT and the NT. The OT is about 3 times longer than the NT. In, three consecutive books in the OT are 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the NT. <Any idea of what they are?> Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The OT came into existence over the space of a millennium more or less; the NT less than a century.

Testament literally means covenant. Hence the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is you well. Delineating them in this way is a way of emphasizing that as Christians we claim that the Jewish Bible remains a vital part of our Scripture.

What we call the OT is grouped roughly into 3 sections.

1. The first 5 books are called the Torah or the Law and have always been regarded as foundational and special. Traditionally, Moses is identified as the author.

2. The Prophets. This includes the history books like Kings, Judges, Samuel and the major and minor prophets. This is by far the biggest (in words) of the Bible.
3. Writings. Psalms, proverbs Daniel, Esther, Song of Solomon, Job, etc.) This group includes very old material (the Psalms) and some that were completed very late (Daniel). There have been ongoing debates, even during Jesus' time about whether some of them belonged (Esther and the Song of Solomon the most contentious). The consensus was they did belong, and so they have remained.

39 books make up the OT. The story of those being put into the canon (rule or measuring stick) is a long and complicated one. Now, 2,000 years plus later, they are the accepted Protestant OT. Most were written in Hebrew. There is some limited Aramaic. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was a huge addition to the historical evidence regarding the canon. The scrolls were written in the last 200 years before Jesus' time and would be what Jesus would have known. During this time, these books were translated into Greek (probably in Egypt) for the benefit of the increasing number of Jews who had Greek as their first language. This was known as the Septuagint, Latin for 70 because of the tradition that there were 70 translators.

It was also during this time that the books known as the Apocrypha began to emerge. There has been a long and complex debate about the validity of the Apocrypha that went on in the early church and reemerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The current state is that some Bibles have the Apocrypha and some don't. <How many of you have a Bible with the Apocrypha? How many of you have read the Apocrypha?> Some Bibles print them between the NT and the OT. Catholic Bibles integrate them into the OT. These books, at the least, give us a description of how Jews of the time of Jesus thought and lived.

The 27 books of the NT were all written within 2 generations of the time of Jesus, before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century at the latest. Most of them were written earlier than that. Paul's letters were written in the 40s and 50s so they are very early accounts of that time. There are other books that are sometimes called the NT Apocrypha, but Wright and most scholars have no reason to suppose they are even close to canonical. They do provide a snapshot into current thought in a later period of history.

The 4 gospels and the 13 letters ascribed to Paul were taken to be authentic and authoritative very early on as early as middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, at the latest. Other books, however, were not as unanimously accepted. Hebrews, Revelation and some of the smaller letters were contentious. Those discussions continued until the Reformation. Martin Luther famously de-

scribed James as an “epistle of straw” and would have been happy if it had not been in the canon.

And important point is that we have way more evidence for the authenticity of the NT than any other single book from the ancient world. Most of our raw data on Plato, Homer, etc. comes from medieval manuscripts, generally only a few. For the NT, there are literally hundreds of early manuscripts dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some are way older than that. Are there scribal differences between the various manuscripts? Of course. But, there is massive evidence that we know what the Biblical authors actually wrote.

<Show slides> The story of the English Bible and modern translations. Greek in the East, Latin in the West. One of the tenants of the Reformation was Scripture alone and that meant that the common people need to be able to read the Bible in their own language.

This is all interesting and important, but it is like giving somebody a biochemical DNA analysis in response to the question what is Joe like? Why is the Bible important?

**The Bible Is God’s Inspired Word.** There is lots of discussion about what this means. Some people use it as actually inspired, God breathed if you will. Some use it more as inspiring. Think about the scripture, like the sacraments, as one of the place where heaven and earth overlap. This is not an easy thing to grasp. It is a bit mysterious. But, it does enable us to say some things. The authors, with their personalities, styles, methods, and intentions were caught up in the God’s purposes, which included communicating the story of God and his creation, especially the new creation, via the written word. Words are not the only communication method in God’s repertoire, it is an important and central one. And, it emphasizes the point that God wants to work through his image-bearing human creatures.

It is important to remember what the Bible is given to us for. Paul, in his second letter to Timothy, puts it like this: <sup>16</sup>“Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. <sup>17</sup>Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.” 2 Tim. 3:16-17, The Message. “Put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us” Or as traditional translations put it, “equipped for every good work”. That is the point. God’s inspired word was written to make us prepared to do His work in the world.

Wright reacts to the arguments about inerrancy and infallibility and other descriptions as clouding the real issue. They distract attention from the real

point of what the Bible was written for. The famous theologian Karl Barth was asked by a woman whether the serpent in Genesis actually spoke. Barth replied, "Madam, it doesn't matter whether the serpent spoke. What matters is *what the serpent said*"

"The Bible is there to enable God's people to be equipped to do God's work in God's world, not to give them an excuse to sit back smugly, knowing they possess all God's truth."

**14. The Story and the Task.** Prospective members of a Covenant church are asked 2 questions: "'Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and promise to follow him as Lord?' and 'Do you accept the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct?'" Embedded in the concept of perfect rule for... is the Bible is authoritative. Wright defines it like this: "What we're saying by calling the Bible 'authoritative' is that the Bible, somehow, becomes an authoritative instrument of what God accomplished through Jesus—particularly through his death and resurrection." Now, that is not easy to figure out, at least it isn't for me. Put it another way, "The Bible, in fact, is not simply an authoritative description of a saving land, as though it were just an aerial photograph of a particular piece of landscape. It is part of the saving plan itself."

<How many of you live in an area with a HOA and covenants? What are some of the rules?> That is why the authority of the Bible is different than the authority of your homeowners association. There are, of course, lists of rules and guidelines for behavior. But, on the whole, it is not a list of dos and don'ts. Living with the authority of the scripture means living in the world of the story which is told in the scripture. It means soaking ourselves in that story and understanding how as Christians we need to be part of the process of continuing the story. We are called learn to hear God's voice speaking today within the ancient text and, as importantly, to become vessels of that living word in the world around us.

As I mentioned early, reading scripture, like praying and sharing the sacraments, is one of the places where life of heaven and the life of earth interlock. We read scripture to hear God addressing us—us, here and now, today. This is of course unpredictable and mysterious. But it does happen as millions of Christians will testify. <Examples of God addressing you through reading the scripture?>

There are techniques and plans for reading the scripture. This is not a recent invention. St. Benedict and others developed something call the *lectio divina*.

I have found this a very useful technique for my own reading. It takes you to texts that you might otherwise not read.

Books <show slide>

- Book of Common Prayer
- Divine Hours (compiled by Phyllis Tickle)
- Common Prayer, A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals
- Celtic Daily Prayer

On Line Resources <show slide>

- Daily readings via web or email:  
<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/devotions/>
- Google "daily scripture readings" for many other examples.
- The iPhone/iPad app YouVersion has several options for daily readings as well as 36 English versions of the Bible and many other languages.

I have used several different plans, all of them very helpful. I'd be glad to discuss or provide references to what I have used.

There is some inherent danger in such plans. You don't want to quench the Spirit. We have to be open to the voice of God in the scripture, and that it can not be codified and documented. Yet, having a plan for reading the Bible has proved to be important for me to provide the discipline to read where I might not otherwise go.

The Bible is not like other sacred books.

- The Hindu writings, the Bhagavad Gita in particular, does not contain a story which the reader is summoned to join as characters.
- The Koran is much like an authoritative rules book, much like the book that some Christians would like the Bible to be.
- Even Judaism doesn't have a continuing story. If anything, the place taken by Jesus in the Christian story is taken in Judaism with seemingly endless codifications and discussions about the Torah.

The Bible, on the other hand, constantly challenges its readers to not rest content. Scripture is there to enable us to glimpse the task before us and to become the kind of people through whom that task can be attempted and accomplished.

**The Challenge of Interpretation.** In a sense, that is what this whole book (and class) tries to answer. To really answer would require a study of each book, each chapter, even each verse to understand the cultural context, the theme, and the overall story of scripture. It is a massive task.

Do not ever forget that the main thing is that we have this book, read it and study it both individually and corporately, and that this book, by the power of Spirit bears witness in multitudes of ways to Jesus himself and to what God has accomplished through him. "The Bible isn't simply a repository of true information about God, Jesus, and the hope of the world. It is, rather, part of *the means by which*, in the power of the Spirit, the living God rescues his people and his world, and takes them forward on the journey toward his new creation, and makes us agents of that new creation even as we travel."

This makes the question about literal interpretation versus metaphorical interpretation beside the point. This whole question is a huge can of worms, one that I am not prepared to tackle, especially in the time we have. If you are interested in Wright's view on the topic, a good one in my opinion, then you read chapter 14, particularly the last part of it.

"The only sure rule is to remember that the Bible is indeed God's gift to the church, to equip that church for its work in the world, and that serious study of it can and should become one of the places where, and the means by which, heaven and earth interlock and God's future purposes arrive in the present. The Bible is part of God's answer to the ancient human quest for justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty. Read it and see."

**Preview:** Next week

- Chap. 15: *Believing and Belonging* (18 pages)
- Chap. 16: *New Creation, Starting Now* (22 pages)

End in prayer.

Prayer for the week: "Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scripture to be written for our learning. Grant me so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that I may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever Amen.