

“I don’t want to take a bath – I’m clean enough!” My impassioned protests as a six-year-old at bedtime were quickly rebuffed by this powerful tool from my parents’ arsenal of guilt-inducing mottoes: “The Bible says that cleanliness is next to godliness!” And as I recall, that was the end of the matter – I dutifully took my bath in the fear of divine reprimand.

It wasn’t until years later that I discovered that “Cleanliness is next to godliness” isn’t in the Bible at all – this famous expression came from a sermon “On Dress” by John Wesley.

When I was growing up I also heard people summarize their homespun religion with the maxim, “God helps those who help themselves.” Even then it seemed to me that this self-help proverb was more like something out of *Second Opinions* or *First Hesitations*. (Actually, it probably originated with Sidney Algernon [1622-1683], in “Discourses on Government.”)

The same is true of other sayings that are falsely attributed to the Bible, such as “To the victor goes the spoils” (actually from William Learned Marcy in his *Life of Jackson*) and “No man is an island” (from the English poet John Donne in his *Meditation XVII*). Even expressions that really are derived from the Bible are distorted in the popular imagination, such as “Money is the root of all evil.” More accurately, 1 Timothy 6:10 does not say that money is *the* root of *all* evil, but something quite different: “*The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil*” (NASB).

In many cases, people who question the reliability of the Bible do so because of false impressions they have gained from sources other than the Bible. Most people’s knowledge about the Bible is derived almost completely from second-, third-, and fourth-hand sources, rather than direct encounters with what the Scriptures really teach. Thus, common misconceptions run rampant, like the popular myth that the books of the New Testament were written centuries after the events they describe or that our earliest New Testament manuscripts go back only to the fourth or fifth centuries A.D. Also, most people have somehow been given the impression that the English Bible is a translation of a translation of a translation (etc.) of the original, and that fresh errors were introduced in each stage of the process.

People frequently say that the Bible is loaded with contradictions, but very few can think of any when asked. The few who can will usually mention the stock objections they were taught, like the two “contradictory” creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. It is a rare person who has personally examined the text to see if the alleged contradiction is really there.

Another popular fiction is that the Bible teaches that the sun and planets revolve around the earth. Some writers delight in referring to the trial of Galileo for his “heretical” notion that the sun is the center of the solar system, but his trial was based on a misinterpretation of the Bible. Similarly, the biblical phrase “the four corners of the earth” has been misunderstood to mean that the earth is flat with four literal corners. But Scripture uses this phrase figuratively, referring to all directions (Isaiah 11:12; Ezekiel 7:2; Rev. 7:1; 20:8).

We live in a culture that has become biblically illiterate and that encourages us to embrace an unbiblical value system. A nationwide survey of religious beliefs by the Barna Research Group, Ventura, California, presented various statements and asked believers and unbelievers for their responses. Here are three of their findings:

- “The Holy Spirit is a symbol of God's presence or power but is not a living entity” – 61 percent agreed strongly or somewhat.
- “The devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil” – 58 percent agreed strongly or somewhat.
- “If a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven” – 51 percent agreed strongly or somewhat. (Source: “Americans' Bible Knowledge Is in the Ballpark, But Often Off Base,” July 12, 2000, Barna Research Online.)

Larry Moody and I observed in *I'm Glad You Asked* that when someone says, “I don't believe the Bible,” it is often helpful to ask, “Do you understand the message of the Bible? Most will acknowledge that they do not, and those who think they do will almost invariably present a distorted picture. We can graciously point this out and say, “I think that you owe it to yourself to have a correct picture of the basic message of the Bible before you decide to accept or reject it.” This can open the door to a clear presentation of the Gospel, and the discussion can go from there. This approach is most appropriate when the objection to the Bible is vague or being used as a smokescreen.

It is desperately important for people in our time to drink deeply and regularly from the well of God's Word. Here are six of the many reasons:

1. *Nourishment and Growth.* The Bible was not merely written for our information, but for our transformation (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

2. *New Priorities and Values.* The study of Scripture can deliver us from the bondage of a temporal perspective and provide us with an eternal value system (Romans 12:1-2).
3. *Overcoming Temptation.* Scripture warns us in advance of the kinds of temptations we can expect (e.g., Proverbs 4:10-27; 5:1-23; 1 John 2:15-16) and shows us how to deal with temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13; Ephesians 6:10-18).
4. *Guidance for Decision Making.* A working knowledge of the commands, prohibitions, and principles of the Bible will give us wisdom and guidance in the decisions that shape the course of our earthly existence (Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 1:2-5).
5. *Knowledge of God.* The Bible is a progressive revelation of the person, plan, character, mind, love, and will of our Creator. We cannot hope to know Him and His ways apart from time spent in His revealed Word.
6. *Knowledge of Ourselves.* The Bible cuts below the façade of appearances and lays bare our secret motivations and plans (Hebrews 4:12). As we read it, the Word becomes a mirror that exhibits our true character, exposes areas of self-delusion, and exhorts us to change (James 1:21-25).