

“InterVarsity Press is doing a very good thing by bringing John Stott’s *The Contemporary Christian* back into print—slightly modernized, helpfully rearranged, and broken into short, reader-friendly books. The result is a boon to a new generation of readers who will greatly benefit, as many have before, from Stott’s thorough grounding in Scripture, unusual help for living the Christian life, and perceptive interaction with the contemporary world.”

**Mark Noll**, author of *The Rise of Evangelicalism*

“I have long benefited from the work of John Stott because of the way he combines rigorous engagement of the biblical text and careful engagement with the culture of his day. The God’s Word for Today series presents Stott at his very best. This series displays his commitment to biblical authority, his zeal for the mission of the church, and his call to faithful witness in the world. Stott’s reflections here are a must-read for church leaders today.”

**Trevin Wax**, director of Bibles and reference at LifeWay Christian Resources, author of *This Is Our Time* and *Eschatological Discipleship*

“Imagine being a child overwhelmed by hundreds of jigsaw puzzle pieces—you just can’t put them together! And then imagine a kindly old uncle comes along and helps you put the whole thing together piece by piece. That is what it felt like reading John Stott’s *The Contemporary Christian*. For those of us who feel we can’t get our head around our Bible, let alone our world, he comes along and, with his staggering gifts of clarity and insight, helps us step by step to work out what it means to understand our world through biblical lenses. It’s then a great blessing to have Tim Chester’s questions at the end of each chapter, which help us think through and internalize each step.”

**Rico Tice**, senior minister for evangelism, All Souls Langham Place, London, coauthor of *Christianity Explored*

“Vintage Stott, with all that that implies. In it, as usual, we find him digesting and deploying a wide range of material with a symmetry matching that of Mozart, a didactic force like that of J. C. Ryle, and a down-to-earth common sense that reminds us of G. K. Chesterton. It is really a pastoral essay, a sermon on paper aimed at changing people . . . an outstandingly good book.”

J. I. Packer, in *Christianity Today*

“In my formative years as a young Christian, I was acutely aware of the fact that I faced many challenges to Christian thinking and behavior. Few writers helped me understand how I should respond to these challenges and think and live as a Christian as much as John Stott did. The challenges of faithfulness to God’s way are more acute and complex today than when I was a young Christian. In these little books you find the essence of Stott’s thinking about the Christian life, and it is refreshing to read again and see how relevant and health giving this material is for today. I’m grateful to InterVarsity Press and to Tim Chester for making Stott’s thinking accessible to a new generation.”

Ajith Fernando, teaching director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka

“It is always refreshing, enlightening, and challenging reading from the pen of John Stott. I am totally delighted that one of his most significant works will continue to be available, hopefully for more decades to come. The way Stott strives to be faithful to the Word of God and relevant to his world—secularized Western society—as the locus for the drama of God’s action is exemplary, especially for those of us ordained to the service of the church in our diverse contexts. I highly commend the God’s Word for Today series to all who share the same pursuit—listening intently to God’s Word and God’s world, hearing and obeying God.”

David Zac Niringiye, author of *The Church: God’s Pilgrim People*

“I am delighted that a new generation will now be able to benefit from this rich teaching, which so helped me when it first appeared. As always with John Stott, there is a wonderful blend of faithful exposition of the Bible, rigorous engagement with the world, and challenging applications for our lives.”

**Vaughan Roberts**, author of *God's Big Picture*

“Technology has enabled more voices to clamor for our attention than ever before; while at the same time, people’s ability to listen carefully seems to have deteriorated like never before. John Stott’s speaking and writing was renowned for two things in particular. He taught us how to listen attentively to God in order to live faithfully for God, and he too modeled how to listen to the world sensitively in order to communicate God’s purposes intelligibly. He taught us to listen. That is why it is such a thrill to see *The Contemporary Christian* carefully revived in a new format as this series for a new generation of readers. As we read, may we listen well!”

**Mark Meynell**, director (Europe and Caribbean) of Langham Preaching, Langham Partnership, author of *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend*

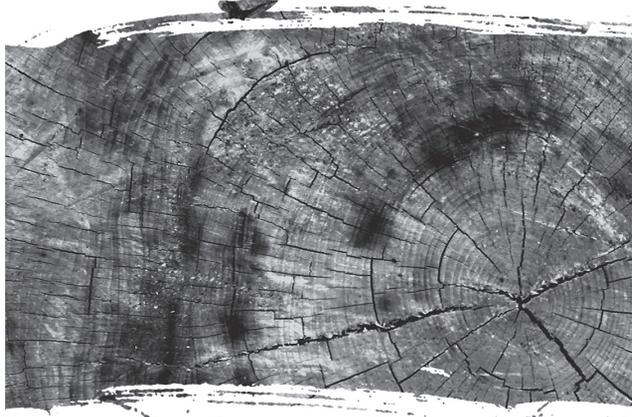
All the royalties from this book have been irrevocably assigned to Langham Literature. Langham Literature is a ministry of Langham Partnership, founded by John Stott. Chris Wright is the International Ministries Director.

Langham Literature provides Majority World preachers, scholars and seminary libraries with evangelical books and electronic resources through publishing and distribution, grants and discounts. They also foster the creation of indigenous evangelical books in many languages through writers' grants, strengthening local evangelical publishing houses and investment in major regional literature projects.

For further information on Langham Literature, and the rest of Langham Partnership, visit the website at [www.langham.org](http://www.langham.org).

with  
TIM CHESTER

John  
Stott



# The Bible

GOD'S WORD FOR TODAY



An imprint of InterVarsity Press  
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press, USA  
P.O. Box 1400  
Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426, USA  
ivpress.com  
email@ivpress.com

Inter-Varsity Press, England  
36 Causton Street  
London SW1P 4ST, England  
ivpbooks.com  
ivp@ivpbooks.com

*This edition* ©2019 by John Stott's Literary Executors

*First edition* ©1992 by John R. W. Stott

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher or the Copyright Licensing Agency.*

*This volume has been adapted from John Stott, The Contemporary Christian (1992), and is one of five titles published in this format in the God's Word for Today series, with extra text, including questions, by Tim Chester. Published by Inter-Varsity Press, England, as The Contemporary Christian series.*

*InterVarsity Press®*, USA, is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA® and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Website: [intervarsity.org](http://intervarsity.org).

*Inter-Varsity Press, England, originated within the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, now the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, a student movement connecting Christian Unions in universities and colleges throughout Great Britain, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Website: [ucf.org.uk](http://ucf.org.uk).*

*Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version Anglicized. Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, an Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790.*

Cover design: Mark Read

Image: Kumiko Shimizu/Unsplash

USA ISBN 978-0-8308-4368-8 (print)

USA ISBN 978-0-8308-6448-5 (digital)

UK ISBN 978-1-78359-770-3 (print)

UK ISBN 978-1-78359-771-0 (digital)

Typeset in Great Britain by CRB Associates, Potterhanworth, Lincolnshire

Printed in the United States of America ☺

*InterVarsity Press is committed to ecological stewardship and to the conservation of natural resources in all our operations. This book was printed using sustainably sourced paper.*

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

*A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.*

---

P	22	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Y	39	38	37	36	35	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	

# Contents

About the authors	viii
Preface	ix
A note to the reader	xi
Series introduction: the Contemporary Christian – the then and the now	1
<i>The Bible</i> : introduction	9
1 Continuing in the Word	11
2 Responding to the Word	24
3 Transposing the Word	37
4 Expounding the Word	58
Conclusion: the now and the not yet	71
Notes	81

## About the authors

**John Stott** had a worldwide ministry as a church leader, a Bible expositor and the author of many award-winning books. He was Rector Emeritus of All Souls, Langham Place, London, and Founder-President of the Langham Partnership.

**Tim Chester** is Pastor of Grace Church, Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire, Chair of Keswick Ministries and the author of more than forty books.

# Preface

To be ‘contemporary’ is to live in the present, and to move with the times without worrying too much about the past or the future.

To be a ‘contemporary Christian’, however, is to live in a present which is enriched by our knowledge of the past and by our expectation of the future. Our Christian faith demands this. Why? Because the God we trust and worship is ‘the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty’,<sup>1</sup> while the Jesus Christ we follow is ‘the same yesterday and today and for ever’.<sup>2</sup>

So this book and series are about how Christians handle time – how we can bring the past, the present and the future together in our thinking and living. Two main challenges face us. The first is the tension between the ‘then’ (past) and the ‘now’ (present), and the second the tension between the ‘now’ (present) and the ‘not yet’ (future).

The Introduction opens up the first problem. Is it possible for us truly to honour the past and live in the present at the same time? Can we preserve Christianity’s historic identity intact without cutting ourselves off from those around us? Can we communicate the gospel in ways that are exciting and modern without distorting or even destroying it? Can we be authentic and fresh at the same time, or do we have to choose?

The Conclusion opens up the second problem: the tension between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’. How far can we explore and experience everything that God has said and done through Christ without straying into what has not yet been revealed or given? How can we develop a proper sense of humility about a future yet to unfold without becoming complacent about where we are in the present?

In between these enquiries into the influences of the past and the future comes an exploration about our Christian responsibilities in the present.

## Preface

This series is about questions of doctrine and discipleship under the five headings: ‘The Gospel’, ‘The Disciple’, ‘The Bible’ (the book you are holding in your hands), ‘The Church’ and ‘The World’, though I make no attempt to be systematic, let alone exhaustive.

In addition to the topic of time, and the relations between past, present and future, there is a second theme running through this series: the need for us to talk less and listen more.

I believe we are called to the difficult and even painful task of ‘double listening’. We are to listen carefully (although of course with differing degrees of respect) both to the ancient Word and to the modern world, in order to relate the one to the other with a combination of faithfulness and sensitivity.

Each book in this series is an attempt at double listening. It is my firm conviction that if we can only develop our capacity for double listening, we will avoid the opposite pitfalls of unfaithfulness and irrelevance, and truly be able to speak God’s Word to God’s world with effectiveness today.

*Adapted from the original Preface by John Stott in 1991*

## A note to the reader

The original book entitled *The Contemporary Christian*, on which this volume and series are based, may not seem ‘contemporary’ to readers more than a quarter of a century later. But both the publisher and John Stott’s Literary Executors are convinced that the issues which John Stott addresses in this book are every bit as relevant today as when they were first written.

The question was how to make this seminal work accessible for new generations of readers. We have sought to do this in the following ways:

- The original work has been divided into a series of several smaller volumes based on the five major sections of the original.
- Words that may not resonate with the twenty-first-century reader have been updated, while great care has been taken to maintain the thought process and style of the author in the original.
- Each chapter is now followed by questions from a current bestselling Christian author to aid reflection and response.

Lovers of the original work have expressed delight that this book is being made available in a way that extends its reach and influence well into a new century. We pray that your life will be enriched as you read, as the lives of many have already been greatly enriched by the original edition.



# Series introduction

## The Contemporary Christian: the then and the now

The expression ‘the contemporary Christian’ strikes many as a contradiction in terms. Isn’t Christianity an antique relic from the remote past, irrelevant to people in today’s world?

My purpose in this series is to show that there is such a thing as ‘contemporary Christianity’ – not something newfangled, but original, historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity, sensitively related to the modern world.

### Christianity: both historical and contemporary

We begin by reaffirming that Christianity is a historical religion. Of course, every religion arose in a particular historical context. Christianity, however, makes an especially strong claim to be historical because it rests not only on a historical *person*, Jesus of Nazareth, but on certain historical *events* which involved him, especially his birth, death and resurrection. There is a common thread here with the Judaism from which Christianity sprang. The Old Testament presents God not only as ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, but also as the God of the covenant which he made with Abraham, and then renewed with Isaac and Jacob. Again, he is not only ‘the God of Moses’, but is also seen as the Redeemer responsible for the exodus, who went on to renew the covenant yet again at Mount Sinai.

Christians are forever tethered in heart and mind to these decisive, historical events of the past. We are constantly encouraged in the

## Series introduction

Bible to look back to them with thankfulness. Indeed, God deliberately made provision for his people to recall his saving actions on a regular basis. Supremely, the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion enables us to call the atoning death of Christ regularly to mind, and so bring the past into the present.

But the problem is that Christianity's foundational events took place such a long time ago. I had a conversation with two brothers some years ago – students who told me they had turned away from the faith of their parents. One was now an agnostic, the other an atheist. I asked why. Did they no longer believe in the truth of Christianity? No, their dilemma was not whether Christianity was *true*, but whether it was *relevant*. How could it be? Christianity, they went on, was a primitive, Palestinian religion from long ago. So what on earth did it have to offer them, living in the exciting modern world?

This view of Christianity is widespread. The world has changed dramatically since Jesus' day, and goes on changing with ever more bewildering speed. People reject the gospel, not necessarily because they think it false, but because it no longer resonates with them.

In response to this we need to be clear about the basic Christian conviction that God continues to speak through what he has spoken. His Word is not a prehistoric fossil, but a living message for the contemporary world. Even granted the historical particularities of the Bible and the immense complexities of the modern world, there is still a fundamental correspondence between them. God's Word remains a lamp to our feet and a light for our path.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, our dilemma remains. Can Christianity both retain its authentic identity *and* demonstrate its relevance?

The desire to present Jesus in a way that appeals to our own generation is obviously right. This was the preoccupation of the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer while in prison during World War 2: 'What is bothering me incessantly,' he wrote, 'is the question . . . who

## Series introduction

Christ really is for us today?<sup>2</sup> It is a difficult question. In answering it, the church has tended in every generation to develop images of Christ which deviate from the portrait painted by the New Testament authors.

### Attempting to modernize Jesus

Here are some of the church's many attempts to present a contemporary picture of Christ, some of which have been more successful than others in remaining loyal to the original.

I think first of *Jesus the ascetic* who inspired generations of monks and hermits. He was much like John the Baptist, for he too dressed in a camel's hair cloak, wore sandals or went barefoot, and munched locusts with evident relish. But it would be hard to reconcile this portrait with his contemporaries' criticism that he was a party-goer who 'came eating and drinking'.<sup>3</sup>

Then there was *Jesus the pale Galilean*. The apostate emperor Julian tried to reinstate Rome's pagan gods after Constantine had replaced them with the worship of Christ, and is reported as having said on his deathbed in AD 363, 'You have conquered, O Galilean.' His words were popularized by the nineteenth-century poet Swinburne:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean;  
The world has grown grey from thy breath.

This image of Jesus was perpetuated in medieval art and stained glass, with a heavenly halo and a colourless complexion, eyes lifted to the sky and feet never quite touching the ground.

In contrast to the presentations of Jesus as weak, suffering and defeated, there was *Jesus the cosmic Christ*, much loved by the Byzantine church leaders. They depicted him as the King of kings and Lord of lords, the creator and ruler of the universe. Yet, exalted high above all things, glorified and reigning, he seemed aloof from

## Series introduction

the real world, and even from his own humanity, as revealed in the incarnation and the cross.

At the opposite end of the theological spectrum, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists of the Enlightenment constructed in their own image *Jesus the teacher of common sense*,<sup>4</sup> entirely human and not divine at all. The most dramatic example is the work of Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States from 1801 to 1809. Rejecting the supernatural as incompatible with reason, he produced his own edition of the Gospels, in which all miracles and mysteries were systematically eliminated. What is left is a guide to a merely human moral teacher.

In the twentieth century we were presented with a wide range of options. Two of the best known owe their popularity to musicals. There is *Jesus the clown of Godspell*, who spends his time singing and dancing, and thus captures something of the gaiety of Jesus, but hardly takes his mission seriously. Somewhat similar is *Jesus Christ Superstar* the disillusioned celebrity, who once thought he knew who he was, but in Gethsemane was no longer sure.

The late President of Cuba, Fidel Castro, frequently referred to Jesus as ‘a great revolutionary’, and there have been many attempts to portray him as *Jesus the freedom fighter*, the urban guerrilla, the first-century Che Guevara, with black beard and flashing eyes, whose most characteristic gesture was to overthrow the tables of the moneychangers and to drive them out of the temple with a whip.

These different portraits illustrate the recurring tendency to update Christ in line with current fashions. It began in the apostolic age, with Paul needing to warn of false teachers who were preaching ‘a Jesus other than the Jesus we [apostles] preached’.<sup>5</sup> Each succeeding generation tends to read back into him its own ideas and hopes, and create him in its own image.

Their motive is right (to paint a contemporary portrait of Jesus), but the result is always distorted (as the portrait is unauthentic). The

challenge before us is to present Jesus to our generation in ways that are both accurate and appealing.

## Calling for double listening

The main reason for every betrayal of the authentic Jesus is that we pay too much attention to contemporary trends and too little to God's Word. The thirst for relevance becomes so demanding that we feel we have to give in to it, whatever the cost. We become slaves to the latest fad, prepared to sacrifice truth on the altar of modernity. The quest for relevance degenerates into a lust for popularity. For the opposite extreme to irrelevance is accommodation, a feeble-minded, unprincipled surrender to the spirit of the time.

God's people live in a world which can be actively hostile. We are constantly exposed to the pressure to conform.

Thank God, however, that there have always been those who have stood firm, sometimes alone, and refused to compromise. I think of Jeremiah in the sixth century BC, and Paul in his day ('everyone . . . has deserted me'),<sup>6</sup> Athanasius in the fourth century and Luther in the sixteenth.

In our own day we too need to resolve to present the biblical gospel in such a way as to speak to modern dilemmas, fears and frustrations, but with equal determination not to compromise it in so doing. Some stumbling-blocks are intrinsic to the original gospel and cannot be eliminated or soft-pedalled in order to make it easier to accept. The gospel contains some features so alien to modern thought that it will always appear foolish, however hard we strive to show that it is 'true and reasonable'.<sup>7</sup> The cross will always be an assault on human self-righteousness and a challenge to human self-indulgence. Its 'scandal' (stumbling-block) simply cannot be removed. The church speaks most authentically not when it has become indistinguishable from the world around us, but when its distinctive light shines most brightly.

## Series introduction

However keen we are to communicate God's Word to others, we must be faithful to that Word and, if necessary, be prepared to suffer for it. God's word to Ezekiel encourages us: 'Do not be afraid of them . . . You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious.'<sup>8</sup> Our calling is to be faithful and relevant, not merely trendy.

How then can we develop a Christian mind which is both shaped by the truths of historic, biblical Christianity and also fully immersed in the realities of the contemporary world? We have to begin with a double refusal. We refuse to become either so absorbed in the Word that we *escape* into it and fail to let it confront the world, or so absorbed in the world that we *conform* to it and fail to subject it to the judgment of the Word.

In place of this double refusal, we are called to double listening. We need to listen to the Word of God with expectancy and humility, ready for God perhaps to confront us with a word that may be disturbing and uninvited. And we must also listen to the world around us. The voices we hear may take the form of shrill and strident protest. There will also be the anguished cries of those who are suffering, and the pain, doubt, anger, alienation and even despair of those who are at odds with God. We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.

Everybody finds listening difficult. But are Christians sometimes less good at listening than others? We can learn from the so-called 'comforters' in the Old Testament book of Job. They began well. When they heard about Job's troubles, they came to visit him and, seeing how great his sufferings were, said nothing to him for a whole week. If only they had continued as they began, and kept their mouths shut! Instead, they trotted out their conventional

## Series introduction

view – that every sinner suffers for his or her own sins – in the most insensitive way. They did not really listen to what Job had to say. They merely repeated their own thoughtless and heartless claptrap, until in the end God stepped in and rebuked them for having misrepresented him.

We need to cultivate ‘double listening’, the ability to listen to two voices at the same time – the voice of God through the Bible and the voices of men and women around us. These voices will often contradict one another, but our purpose in listening to them both is to discover how they relate to each other. Double listening is indispensable to Christian discipleship and to Christian mission.

It is only through this discipline of double listening that it is possible to become a ‘contemporary Christian’. We bring ‘historical’ and ‘contemporary’ together as we learn to apply the Word to the world, proclaiming good news which is both true and new.

To put it in a nutshell, we live in the ‘now’ in the light of the ‘then’.



# ***The Bible***

## **Introduction**

‘We present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom; this is the royal law; these are the lively oracles of God.’ With these words in the coronation service the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland handed Queen Elizabeth a copy of the Bible when she was crowned in 1953.

It might be tempting to dismiss such claims for the Bible as idle rhetoric, were it not that successive generations of Christian people have found them to be true. Scripture has brought us light in darkness, strength in weakness, comfort in sadness. And so we readily endorse the psalmist’s declaration that the words of God ‘are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb’.<sup>1</sup>

So it has been distressing in the West to watch the Bible being dislodged from its position of acknowledged authority, not only in the nation but also in the church. There is little hope for thoroughgoing national reform or church renewal unless the Word of God is once more widely respected, and its teaching followed.

This book is my small contribution to this goal, as I write about the urgent need to continue in, respond to, interpret and expound God’s Word.



# 1

## Continuing in the Word

It is a regular theme of the New Testament authors that the people of God must be steadfast. On the one hand, we must resist the intellectual and moral pressures of our contemporary world, and refuse to conform to the trends and fashions of the day. We are not to let ourselves slip, slither and slide in the mud of relativity. We cannot let ourselves be torn from our moorings and be carried away by the flood. On the other hand, we are positively called to persevere in the truth we have received, to cling to it as a secure handhold in the storm, and to stand firm on this foundation.

Here are some examples of this kind of exhortation, by three of the major contributors to the New Testament.

*Paul:* ‘So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you.’<sup>1</sup>

*Hebrews:* ‘We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.’<sup>2</sup>

*John:* ‘See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you.’<sup>3</sup> ‘Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.’<sup>4</sup>

Common to these quotations is the recognition that certain truths had been ‘taught’ or ‘passed on’ by the apostles, and had consequently been ‘heard’ or ‘received’ by the church. This body of doctrine was now a sacred deposit to be guarded.<sup>5</sup> It had a normative quality. The church must remain in it and hold to it, neither going back from it, nor going on beyond it in such a way as to contradict it.

## Continuing in the Word

Part of Paul's final charge to Timothy elaborates this theme. In order to grasp its implications, we need to have 2 Timothy 3:1 – 4:8 before us.

**3** <sup>1</sup>But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days. <sup>2</sup>People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, <sup>3</sup>without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, <sup>4</sup>treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – <sup>5</sup>having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

<sup>6</sup>They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, <sup>7</sup>always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. <sup>8</sup>Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. <sup>9</sup>But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.

<sup>10</sup>You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, <sup>11</sup>persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. <sup>12</sup>In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup>while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. <sup>14</sup>But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All

## Continuing in the Word

Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

<sup>4</sup> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: <sup>2</sup> preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. <sup>3</sup> For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. <sup>4</sup> They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. <sup>5</sup> But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

<sup>6</sup> For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

## Standing in the Word

Paul's exhortation to Timothy was given against the background of the kind of society he was living in (3:1–13). It was a context that was hostile to the gospel. Nor could the gospel be reshaped in order to accommodate to society's ideas and standards. On the contrary, Paul was aware of a radical incompatibility between the Word and the world. 'Mark this,' he wrote: 'There will be terrible times in the last days.'

It is important to realize that by 'the last days' the apostle was not alluding to some future era immediately preceding the return of

Christ. For in verse 5 he tells Timothy to 'have nothing to do' with the people he has been describing. How could Timothy avoid them if they had not yet been born? No, 'the last days' from the perspective of the New Testament began with Jesus Christ. He ushered them in.<sup>6</sup> The last days are therefore these days, the days in which Timothy lived and in which we also live. They are the whole period between the first and second comings of Christ.

What are the characteristics of the last days? Three seem to stand out from Paul's description.

The first is *misdirected love*. Of the nineteen distinguishing marks which the apostle lists (verses 2–4), it is striking that six have to do with love. 'People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money . . . without love . . . not lovers of the good . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.' The expression 'without love' must be understood as meaning 'without true love'. For the people in view are not devoid of love altogether; they love themselves, they love money and they love pleasure. But these are examples of *misdirected* love. Self, money and pleasure are inappropriate objects of human love. They even become idolatrous when they displace God from his rightful place as the One to be loved with all our being. Yet we see misdirected love everywhere today. Self-absorption, covetousness and hedonism are rife, while the first and second commandments, to love God and our neighbour, are neglected. Moreover, when people's love is directed to the wrong objects, all their relationships go wrong. They become 'boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient . . . ungrateful . . . unforgiving, slanderous' (verses 2–3).

The second characteristic of our age is *empty religion*. Our contemporaries are described as 'having a form of godliness but denying its power' (verse 5). It may seem extraordinary that people characterized by self-love could also be religious. But this is what Paul says. Indeed, it is possible for religion, which is intended to express the worship of God, to become perverted into a means of ego-inflation. The proper name for this sick distortion is hypocrisy, and Jesus

## Continuing in the Word

vehemently attacked it.<sup>7</sup> Such religion is ‘form’ without ‘power’, outward show without inward reality. It is also an enemy of the gospel, because nominal Christianity hardens people against real Christianity.

Third, the last days are distinguished by *the cult of an open mind*. Paul writes here of people who are ‘always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth’ (verse 7). They sit on the fence and refuse to come down on either side of it. Tolerance is their watchword. Determined to avoid the pain of reaching definite conclusions, they make a fetish of keeping their mind open. They cannot endure what C. S. Lewis called ‘the tyrannous noon of revelation’;<sup>8</sup> they prefer the twilight of free thought. They have overlooked the distinction which Allan Bloom pointed out between two kinds of ‘openness’ – ‘the openness of indifference . . . and the openness that invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude’.<sup>9</sup> The latter is an aspect of the Christian virtue of humility, acknowledging that our understanding is provisional and incomplete, and always seeking to increase it. The former, on the other hand, is not only insulting to truth, but personally perilous. It exposes us to the danger, as one bishop has put it, of having our minds so open that our brains fall out!

Here, then, are three characteristics of our time, which Scripture resolutely criticizes and tells us to avoid.

- We are to love God and our neighbour, and not misdirect our love to self, money or pleasure.
- We are to value the reality and power of religion above its outward forms.
- We are to submit humbly to God’s revelation and not cultivate a wishy-washy undemanding agnosticism.

Thus, Paul calls Timothy to be different from the world around him. After his portrayal of these ungodly trends, Paul twice writes *su de*, which is translated ‘You, however’, and then ‘But as for you’ in verses

## Continuing in the Word

10 and 14. These words introduce the apostle's two exhortations to Timothy to resist the mood of the world. The first exhortation focuses on what Timothy has already come to know about Paul: his 'teaching', his 'way of life', his 'purpose', together with his 'faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings' (verses 10–13). Timothy had seen Paul's ministry with his own eyes, including the opposition and persecution which he had had to endure in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra (verse 11). For the fact is that 'everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (verse 12), since 'evildoers and impostors', who reject the gospel, 'will go from bad to worse' (verse 13).

Thus, the apostle contrasts the low standards of the world with his own teaching and conduct. The two were in irreconcilable antagonism to one another. Hence the persecution Paul had had to bear. If Timothy were to stand firm, taking Paul's side against the world's, he would undoubtedly have to suffer too.

## Continuing in the Word

Paul's mention of the 'evildoers and impostors', deceiving and being deceived, who would 'go from bad to worse' (verse 13), leads him to his second *su de*, 'But as for you'. This time, rather than just looking back to his past teaching, conduct and sufferings which Timothy had come to know, he also looks to the future: 'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it' (verse 14). These teachers from whom Timothy had learned are probably first his mother and grandmother who had taught him the Old Testament from his infancy (verse 15; cf. 1:5), and second the apostle, whose 'teaching' (verse 10) Timothy knew and which for us is preserved in the New Testament. Thus, Paul contrasts two sets of teachers – on the one hand, the impostors and deceivers of verse 13, and on the other, Timothy's mother and mentor (the apostle himself) who had taught him the Scriptures.

## Continuing in the Word

Today we too need to pay attention to the same summons. We are not to be like reeds blown by the wind. We are not to bow down before the prevailing trends of society, with its covetousness and materialism, its relativism, and its rejection of all absolute standards of truth and goodness. Instead, we are to continue faithfully in the Old and New Testament Scriptures.

But why? What is Scripture that it should occupy such an important place in our lives? The apostle goes on to stress three fundamental aspects of it.

First, *Scripture is able to instruct us for salvation* (verse 15, rsv). Its primary purpose is practical. It is more a guidebook than a textbook, more a book of salvation than a book of science. This is not to say that the biblical and scientific accounts of the world are in conflict, but rather that they are complementary. God's purpose in Scripture is not to reveal facts that can be discovered by the scientific method of observation and experiment, but rather to reveal truths which are beyond the scope of science, in particular God's way of salvation through Christ.

This is why Jesus Christ is himself the centre of the biblical revelation, since it bears witness to him.<sup>10</sup> As J.-J. von Allmen has expressed it, 'the heart of the Scripture (what sums it up and makes it live) or the head of the Scripture (. . . what explains it and justifies it) . . . is Jesus Christ. To read the Bible without meeting him is to read it badly, and to preach the Bible without proclaiming him is to preach it falsely.'<sup>11</sup> It is because Scripture instructs us for salvation that it instructs us about Christ, by faith in whom we receive salvation. Moreover, the reason we love the Bible is that it speaks to us of Christ. It is God's picture, God's portrait, of Christ.

Second, *Scripture is God-breathed*. The better-known AV phrase consists of five words, 'given by inspiration of God'. But the NIV is correct to use the one word 'God-breathed' as the precise equivalent of the Greek expression *theopneustos*. This tells us that Scripture is the Word of God, spoken by God, or breathed out of the mouth of

## Continuing in the Word

God. The implied combination of mouth, breath and word shows that the model of inspiration which is intended is that of human speech. For speech is communication between minds. Often we keep what is 'on our mind' to ourselves. But when we speak, we clothe the thoughts of our minds in the words of our mouth.

We observe also that the text reads, 'All Scripture is God-breathed' (verse 16). The NEB, on the other hand, translates the clause 'every inspired Scripture is useful'. This is almost certainly incorrect. It implies that if every inspired Scripture is useful, there must be other Scriptures which are not inspired and therefore not useful. But, in the first place, the concept of 'uninspired Scripture' is a contradiction in terms since the word 'Scripture' simply means inspired writing. Second, the NEB omits, without sufficient warrant, the little word *kai*, meaning 'and' or 'also'. It shows that Paul is not making one statement ('every inspired Scripture is useful'), but two ('every Scripture is inspired *and* useful'). Indeed, it is useful to us precisely because it is inspired by God.

Nevertheless, we must not mis-state the truth of inspiration. When God spoke, he did not speak into space. Nor did he write documents and leave them around to be discovered, as Joseph Smith (founder of the Mormon Church) claimed regarding his golden plates. Nor did God dictate Scripture to non-participating secretaries, as Muslims believe Allah dictated the Qur'an to Muhammad in Arabic. No, by the process of inspiration we mean that the human authors, even while God was speaking to and through them, were themselves actively engaged in historical research, theological reflection and literary composition. For much of Scripture is historical narrative, and each author has his own particular theological emphasis and literary style. Divine inspiration did not dispense with human co-operation, or iron out the peculiar contributions of the authors.

So 'God-breathed' is not the only account which Scripture gives of itself, since God's mouth was not the only mouth involved in its

## Continuing in the Word

production. The same Scripture which says ‘the mouth of the LORD has spoken’<sup>12</sup> also says that God spoke ‘by the mouth of his holy prophets’.<sup>13</sup> Out of whose mouth did Scripture come then? God’s or the prophet’s? The only biblical answer is ‘both’. Indeed, God spoke through the human authors in such a way that his words were simultaneously their words, and their words were simultaneously his. This is the double authorship of the Bible. Scripture is equally the Word of God and the words of human beings. Even better, it is the Word of God through the words of human beings.

It is essential to keep the two authorships together. Some theologians, ancient and modern, Catholic and Protestant, have appealed to the two natures of Christ as an analogy. Although the parallel is not exact, it is illuminating. In the person of Christ (who is both God and human) we must neither affirm his deity in such a way as to deny his humanity, nor affirm his humanity in such a way as to deny his deity, but rather affirm both equally, refusing to allow either to contradict the other. In the same way, in our doctrine of Scripture we must neither affirm that it is the Word of God in such a way as to deny that it is the words of human beings (which is fundamentalism), nor affirm that it is the words of human beings in such a way as to deny that it is the Word of God (which is liberalism), but rather affirm both equally, refusing to allow either to contradict the other. Thus, on the one hand, God spoke,<sup>14</sup> determining what he wanted to say, yet without smothering the personality of the human authors. On the other hand, human beings spoke,<sup>15</sup> using their faculties freely, yet without distorting the truth that God was speaking through them.

We have no right to declare that such a combination is impossible. To say so, wrote Dr J. I. Packer, would indicate

a false doctrine of God, here particularly of his providence . . .  
For it assumes that God and man stand in such a relationship  
to each other that they cannot both be free agents in the same

## Continuing in the Word

action. If man acts freely (i.e. voluntarily and spontaneously), God does not, and vice versa. The two freedoms are mutually exclusive. But the affinities of this idea are with Deism, not Christian theism . . . The cure for such fallacious reasoning is to grasp the biblical idea of God's *concurrent operation* in, with and through the free working of man's own mind.<sup>16</sup>

The way we understand Scripture will affect the way we read it. In particular, its double authorship demands a double approach. Because Scripture is the Word of God, we should read it as we read no other book – on our knees, humbly, reverently, prayerfully, looking to the Holy Spirit for illumination. But because Scripture is also the words of human beings, we should read it as we read *every* other book, using our minds, thinking, pondering and reflecting, and paying close attention to its literary, historical, cultural and linguistic characteristics. This combination of humble reverence and critical reflection is not only not impossible; it is indispensable.<sup>17</sup>

Third, *Scripture is useful* (verses 16–17). It is able to do more than instruct us for salvation (verse 15); it is also 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (verse 16). In other words, it is profitable both for doctrine (teaching truth and correcting error) and for ethics (rebuking sin and training in right living). It leads us on in Christian belief and behaviour until we become men and women of God, 'thoroughly equipped for every good work' (verse 17). In these ways the Bible has an essential part to play in our growth into maturity in Christ, as we will consider more fully in the next chapter. In contrast to the errors of the 'evildoers and impostors', Timothy was to continue in the Word of God, both the Old Testament Scriptures and the apostle's teaching.

Thank God for the Bible! God has not left us to grope our way in the darkness; he has given us a light to show us the path. He has not abandoned us to flounder in heavy seas; Scripture is a rock on which we may stand. Our resolve should be to study it, believe it and obey it.

## Preaching the Word

Neither Timothy nor anybody else has the right to monopolize Scripture. For Scripture is nobody's private possession; it is public property. Having been given by God, it belongs to all. His Word has been spoken in order to be passed on. So the apostle, conscious of God's presence and of Christ's future appearing for judgment (4:1), gives Timothy this charge: 'Preach the Word' (verse 2). He must proclaim it like a herald or town crier in the market-place. He must do so boldly, urgently and relevantly, correcting, rebuking and encouraging according to people's state and need, and 'with great patience and careful instruction' (verse 2).

This was all the more necessary, Paul added, because the time was coming when people will 'not put up with sound doctrine'. Instead, suffering from a strange pathological condition called 'itching ears', they will listen to teachers who say what they want to hear, rather than to the truth which God wants to say to them (verses 3–4). Yet the unwillingness of some to listen to the Word of God is no reason why we should give up preaching it! On the contrary, Timothy was to persevere, to keep his head, to endure opposition, and to fulfil his ministry faithfully, both as an evangelist and as a teacher (verse 5).

One of the greatest needs of the contemporary church is conscientious biblical exposition from the pulpit (see chapter 4). Ignorance of even the rudiments of the faith is widespread. Many Christians are immature and unstable. And the major reason for this sorry state of affairs is the scarcity of responsible, thorough, balanced biblical preachers. The pulpit is not the place to air our own opinions, but to unfold God's Word.

The climax of the apostle's exhortation is reached in verses 6–8. In a previous letter, written about two years earlier, he had described himself as 'an old man'.<sup>18</sup> Now he writes that the time of his departure has come. Indeed, the pouring out of his life like a drink offering has already begun (verse 6). Looking back over his apostolic career, he is

## Continuing in the Word

able to say that he has fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith (verse 7). He has no regrets. He is probably incarcerated in the underground Mamertine Prison in Rome, from which he is not expecting to be released. Already with his mind's eye he sees the flash of the executioner's sword, and beyond it 'the crown of righteousness' which on the last day Jesus, the righteous Judge, will give both to him and to 'all who have longed for his appearing' (verse 8). It is this sense that his ministry is nearing its end which prompts him to exhort Timothy to stand firm in the Word, continue in it and pass it on.

I hope it will not be thought too personal if I say that I understand and feel the poignancy of Paul's words, although I do not of course presume to compare myself with him. But as I write these words, I have recently celebrated my seventieth birthday, my statutory 'three score years and ten'.<sup>19</sup> So, naturally, I ask myself, where are the Timothys of the next generation? Where are the young evangelicals, who are determined by God's grace to stand firm in Scripture, refusing to be swept off their feet by the prevailing winds of fashion, who are resolved to continue in it and live by it, relating the Word to the world in order to obey it, and who are committed to passing it on as they give themselves to the ministry of conscientious exposition?

### Reflection questions from Tim Chester

- 1 Do you think of the teaching you have received as 'a sacred deposit to be guarded'? What might this look like in practice?
- 2 When do you feel pressure from the world around you to compromise on the truth of Scripture?
- 3 'To read the Bible without meeting Christ is to read it badly.' Do you come to the Bible looking to meet Christ?
- 4 The Bible's 'double authorship demands a double approach' – a 'combination of humble reverence and critical reflection'. What does it look like for you to read the Bible with humble reverence?

## Continuing in the Word

- 5 What does it look like for you to read the Bible with critical reflection?
- 6 Both the apostle Paul and John Stott write as men coming to the end of their lives and wanting to see a new generation of Bible people. How would you answer Stott's question, 'Where are the Timothys of the next generation?' Where do you belong in the answer?