

Advice for disciples

Telling it like it is

Introduction

While this is written specifically for young believers, I trust that the information will be of use to any Christian, young or old. It is written from a completely subjective perspective of someone that has been in the faith, and survived by God's grace, for over forty-five years.

Here I intend to be completely frank and ruthlessly honest; so I will probably cut across many other similar counsels that parrot the same old things. Real people have real problems and these need to be addressed honestly.

What you read will either make you stronger or weaker

Reading is feeding your mind and soul, so what you put into them will affect them positively or negatively.

Get a good Bible version

It is of first importance that you use a good Bible for your daily reading and study. I cannot emphasise this enough. Many people soak up false teachings by osmosis as a result of reading a bad Bible translation. I regularly note how a version inculcates a heresy by wrongly translating a verse. Even worse is when translators add words to texts that are not in the original manuscripts.

For example here is the NIV translation of Ps 145:13

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The Lords is faithful to all his promises and loving towards all he has made.

Here are other versions

KJV: Psalm 145:13 Thy kingdom *is* an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion *endureth* throughout all generations.

ASV: Psalm 145:13 Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And thy dominion *endureth* throughout all generations.

NAS: Psalm 145:13 Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And Thy dominion *endures* throughout all generations.

NAB: Psalm 145:13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And Your dominion *endures* throughout all generations.

NKJ: Psalm 145:13 Your kingdom *is* an everlasting kingdom, And Your dominion *endures* throughout all generations.

Darby: Psalm 145:13 Thy kingdom is a kingdom of all ages, and thy dominion is throughout all generations.

Young's Literal Translation: Psalm 145:13 Thy kingdom {is} a kingdom of all ages, And Thy dominion {is} in all generations.

The NIV has added a whole sentence that is not in the best manuscripts. Not only that, it adds words that are contrary to other Scriptures. It says that God is 'loving' to all he has made, when Scripture actually says that God hates sinners, the wicked, the blasphemous etc. (Ps 5:4, 6, 11:5 etc.).

The reason for this is that the Arminian translators on the NIV translation committee chose to add words that favour their heresy and went against good translation protocols. Only one Masoretic manuscript has these lines; the vast majority do not.

The NIV of verse 17 says,

The LORD *is* righteous in all His ways, and loving towards all he has made.

While the NKJV (and others) says,

The LORD *is* righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works.

The word 'gracious' is *chaciyd* meaning: faithful, kind, godly, holy one, saint, pious. Therefore good translations use either 'holy', 'kind', 'gracious', 'righteous' and not one other uses 'loving' because the Hebrew word for 'love' is not used.

These two examples alone show that the NIV is completely untrustworthy for any true believer. Saints should never use it. Sadly millions are in circulation.

False translations

Some versions are simply written to support a false religion, such as the versions used by the Jehovah's Witnesses¹ or Roman Catholics.² These often twist scriptures to enhance their heresies or cover up truth. You cannot expect to get to the truth of God's word if you use one of these.

Poor translations

There are so many of these today. The basis of Scripture is to read the words that God inspired in order to see the thoughts he had in his mind. Poor translations completely twist the text in order to fit some agenda, such as being credible to young people or to be more readable. The worst of these are shocking, such as 'The Message, which is a terrible piece of work.

Weak translations

In this category fit all the paraphrases and well-meaning but weak attempts to represent the true facts. Thus here I would place précis translations and Dynamic Equivalence translations. It is just impossible to get an accurate translation of God's word if you use a 'thought for thought' method instead of a literal translation. It is better for the Bible student to struggle a bit over readability in order to see what God actually wrote.

There are some old fashioned paraphrase versions that can be useful if read in conjunction with a good literal translation, to get new light on a passage; Weymouth, for example, can be useful.³ But you should never use a paraphrase version to study with; they are just not up to the task because words are used which God did not write.

¹ The New World Translation.

² Jerusalem Bible, New Jerusalem Bible, Knox Version, Rheims-Douay Bible. The New American Bible (1970) was translated by 45 Catholic and five Protestant scholars.

³ R F Weymouth; 'New Translation in Modern Speech' (1903). This was done from the Greek giving particular attention to the verb tenses. The author attempted to give the proper idea of the tenses as he set the information into English.

The wrong source

I cannot fully explain the argument about this here, but Bible versions are based on, roughly, one of two sources for the NT. Most modern translations follow the 'eclectic text', which is based on the 'Alexandrian Text Family'. These rest on the majority of Greek manuscripts but the consensus is questionable and some key manuscripts are faulty. The Byzantine Textual family rests upon fewer manuscripts but is more trustworthy. There are scores of verses that are found in the latter but are missing in the former. Good versions will explain these differences in the margin notes.

The only common versions found based on the Byzantine family are the King James Version (or Authorised Version) or the New King James Version. My recommendation would be to use the NKJV as it is easier to read and has fewer errors (all Bible versions have errors because they were made by men).⁴

Having said that, a good literal translation, even though it is based on Alexandrian texts, can be useful as a comparison when reading, such as the New American Standard Version, The Revised Standard Version or the English Standard Version (which is based on the RSV). However, these cannot be trusted in disputed passages where their manuscripts have missing portions.

Popular modern versions, such as the New International Version should, in my view, be completely rejected. This is the worst of all worlds: it is based on Alexandrian texts, it is a sort of paraphrase (Dynamic Equivalence method) and it is centred in defending Arminian theology.

Useful Bible resources*Getting at the Greek*

You must remember that only the original texts were inspired. We do not have these but rely on copies made by men, who sometimes made mistakes. Textual study is a complicated and arduous discipline, but we can safely say that the extant manuscripts available gives us as close to God's original words as we can get. Again there are two sources, the eclectic text and the Byzantine text.

The eclectic Alexandrian type text is found in the 'Greek New Testament', UBS4 - NA 27. This is the United Bible Societies version 4, which equates to the Nestle-Aland edition 27. The Byzantine text type is found in the Scrivener 1881 edition, which is based on the Beza 1589. This is very similar to what is known as the Textus Receptus ('Received Text') which was published after the original 1611 Authorised Version but which contains very similar Greek text to that underlying it.

Now, I am giving you too much information but it is useful. What serious Bible students will need is to get at the Greek text to see what words are actually used. Some Greek words can have 20 meanings and a Bible translator can only choose one. Proper Bible study needs to examine the Greek NT.

Now this can be done by the novice with a good interlinear Greek-English NT, of which there are many. My advice is to get one that is based on the Byzantine text type, it will probably refer to the Textus Receptus. [There are also interlinears for the Hebrew text of the OT but these are much harder to find and are expensive.]

⁴ Ignore the foolish claims of those who tell you that the KJV was inspired. In fact, when it appeared as a political compromise sponsored by King James I, the Puritans hated it and kept to their Geneva Bible.

Today there are numerous Internet and computer resources, which do this same work. My advice is to download the E-Sword program or App. This is free and it is one of the best. It will enable you to find the Greek words underlying the NT text and also give you options of lexicons to help you define those words and give syntax.

There are also literal translations available. One that is common is Young's Literal Translation, which can give a useful light on a passage but cannot be trusted completely. It is better to do your own study of the Greek. The Amplified Version (which gives alternative translations of words) cannot be entirely trusted, but can offer some useful help.

There are also commentaries on the Greek text which can be very useful.

- Robertson's Word Pictures of the NT [available in E-Sword].
- MR Vincent, Word Studies in the NT [available in E-Sword].
- Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the NT.
- Kenneth Wuest, Word Studies.

Then there are dictionaries and lexicons of Greek words. Some have agendas but are still helpful. These include:

- Vine's Expository Dictionary of NT Words. Some Bible's have Vine included as an appendix.
- EW Bullinger, A Critical Lexicon and Concordance.
- Joseph Thayer's Lexicon.
- Appendix in Young's Concordance.
- Index in Strong's Concordance. The Zodiates Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible has Strong's Concordance as an appendix plus Lexical Aids by Spiros Zodiates that offer extended definitions.

I will avoid any further evaluations and listings as I have supplied that in other papers.⁵

Concordances

These used to be vital to the Bible student in order to find texts. The best ones also have good information on the original language meanings. Thus I could recommend either Strong's Concordance or Young's Concordance. However, today, there are many Bible computer programs that enable fast searches at the tap of a button, E-Sword will enable this for you.

Commentaries

Of these there is no end. Many are useful; some are terrible. An analysis of this is pointless here and I have examined this before.⁶ I will simply mention useful one-volume Bible commentaries, several of which are also in E-Sword.

Matthew Henry's commentary. An old favourite of many. Very devotional and warm but difficult for technical studies.

Matthew Poole's Commentary. More practical than Henry and possibly more useful.

Jamieson Fausset and Brown Commentary. Available in full and abridged forms. Superb.

⁵ Such as: Bible Language Resources.

⁶ For example, 'Advice on choosing books', 'Straightforward Books of Teaching and Encouragement', 'Essential Book List for Bible Students', 'Choosing Commentaries'.

Adam Clarke's Commentary. Written from an Arminian perspective so it cannot be trusted on those issues. However, Clarke was an extremely good exegete and is sometimes better than others on a text.

John Gill's Commentary. Written from a high Calvinist perspective and somewhat dated, but often very good indeed.

Albert Barnes. Notes on the NT and some OT books. Though a layman, Barnes often surpasses other commentaries.

There are many others but these will suffice any basic needs. All of them can be found cheap in second-hand bookshops or on-line or in programmes like E-Sword.

We must move on.

What else are you reading?

Good stuff

Many people complain that they cannot read books but read a whole newspaper every day, which is equivalent to a book a week. Reading can even be fitted into a busy life; it just requires motivation. In one busy period of my life I managed to read a book a fortnight in my lunch break. It is easy to read a book a week on a train commuter journey.

Reading sound words feeds you but reading rubbish is deleterious. Now I am not opposed to reading fiction, though I have no time for it myself, because sometimes a person needs to relax and a good quality novel can still do you some good: introduce you to new words, teach you writing style, make a certain moral point etc. However, just reading fiction alone is a waste of time for a believer, only fractionally better than just reading secular magazines.

Reading non-fiction and learning something new is always good as it stretches the mind; however reading good quality Christian works of all sorts blesses the soul. Some prefer devotional works (I don't, as I prefer to do my own devotions). Biographies of great saints, preachers, theologians and missionaries are always beneficial; you can learn much from a good biography. Then there are books on Biblical or theological subjects. I accept that these are not for everyone, but they are extremely helpful to Christian growth.

Today there are a plethora of Christian ministries supplying teaching material over the internet; I am one such person. When these are sound and trustworthy, they can be a good alternative to buying lots of books and, hopefully, they will be dealing with pressing issues of our time.

Bad stuff

Of this there is no end. Where do I start? I won't enlarge on this because it is simply obvious to a believer. Bad reading material is that which does not glorify Christ, does not edify or tends to evil. For example, reading a daily tabloid newspaper is a sheer waste of a believer's time, and it will be mostly full of lies, obfuscation and misrepresentation anyway.

Make the most of the opportunity

Your time is short on this earth, make good use of it. When you get older you will regret that you did not read more good books, unless you read lots of good books.

Good books aid Christian growth and big books make big people. Always stretch yourself to read stronger works so that you grow into them. Write down words that you do not know

so that you can look them up later. In fact, keep a record of these in a notebook so that you can reprise what you have learned. Soon you will greatly enlarge your vocabulary.

Grasp theology as best you can

I realise that not everyone is called to be an academic theologian. Yet everyone is called to be a student of theology if they want to know God better.

Now this sounds difficult, but it is not if you read the right things. Everybody needs to get an overall grasp of theology. This includes the following:

- You need to have a basic knowledge of the loci (subjects) of theology and have some simple understanding of them. Do not allow yourself to live for years having no knowledge at all about important subjects, such as justification, redemption or sanctification. Teach yourself the basics.
- You need to have a grasp of the Bible texts that give a foundation for these subjects.
- You need a simple knowledge of the different systems of theology so that you can understand what you read and hear. It is important to have a basic understanding of Arminianism, Calvinism, Amyraldism and Pelagianism for instance, in order to understand the Gospel. If you do not know about these things, how can you discern what is false teaching?

Now this is not that difficult to achieve; it just means some basic studying and reading good material. For example, I write papers on such issues all the time to supply this lack in folk. Other writers do the same.

Then there are good books that give a brief and simple explanation of Bible doctrines that are not great tomes for professors. For example Louis Berkhof's, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* is a slim Banner of Truth paperback that explains Bible doctrines succinctly. RC Sproul's, *Essential Truths of the Christian Life*, goes through most doctrines in a page or two. EF Kevan's book, *What the Scriptures Teach*, is only 79 pages. We may not agree with everything they say, but we can agree on most things and thus they are useful tools.⁷

Then there are slightly larger works for those who can cope with them, such as: TC Hammond's, *In Understanding Be Men* or its successor, *Know the Truth* by Bruce Milne.

Finally there are systematic theologies, in one or more large volumes, by great theologians, plus individual books on theological subjects. For instance James Buchanan's *The Doctrine of Justification* is a classic, as is the more succinct *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray.

There are also summaries available today of great theological works, such as *Not Guilty*, a summary of Buchanan's work; plus *Life By His Death*, a summary of John Owen's classic, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*; or *Born Slaves*, a summary of Martin Luther's *Bondage of the Will* [by Grace Publications].

Good published sermons can also be helpful here. Banner of Truth has published many items in the series 'Puritan Paperbacks', where single doctrines are expounded, often in sermon form, which are easy to read.

⁷ For example most Reformed theologians are paedobaptists, but the Bible teaches the baptism of disciples, not infants.

One way or another any reasonable person can come to a certain understanding of the great themes of theology without too much struggle; it just needs some application. The more you do this, the more you will be able to protect yourself from error and help others see the truth. If you are not academic, you don't need to buy all four volumes of Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics (which are great by the way), or Hodge's three-volume Systematic Theology (not as good); but you ought to try smaller things.

I would also recommend that you have at least one decent systematic, and/or a theological dictionary, available for consultation when you have questions. I have analysed these elsewhere.⁸

Focus on the truth

Above all you do, focus upon truth.

This seems obvious, but it is rarely done properly. Most people have an agenda to follow and the truth gets subjugated to this or that prior commitment.

However, I will give this warning to the wary; if you follow the truth zealously, you will struggle for it. Zeal for the truth always comes with suffering. Be prepared to lose friends; very few people prefer the truth above all else.

It was holding the truth that focused the Pharisaic opposition of Jesus that led to his death. It was the focus upon truth that led to Paul's various persecutions from the Jews and led many to desert him later in life. It was preaching the truth that put John into exile on a deserted island. It was preaching the truth that led to Timothy being disparaged and discouraged.

Most people do not want the truth. They mostly do not want their boats to be rocked. Most people want a comfortable life, which is odd since the Christian is promised suffering in this world. If you seek the truth you will be at odds with most people. This is just as true in the church today as it is in the world.

However, the truth is its own reward since the truth is in Jesus. Growing in the truth is the most exciting activity in the world. Truth changes people and being able to teach the truth to people is the best gift.

Truth never fails. There is no argument against the truth. All truth finds its centre in God, whose very word is truth. Growing in the truth is growing in God. There is great joy in finding the truth because it brings us closer to understanding God's character and attributes.

The great necessity in growing in the truth is being open to change. You must let the truth of God's word change you and that sometimes means abandoning wrong things that you have believed for years. If you cannot shed errors, then you cannot grow in truth.

Obey your conscience

Little is spoken about the conscience these days, but it is an important matter.

⁸ See my 'Systematic Theologies'.

That it is important is shown in Paul's statement that by ignoring the conscience some people shipwrecked their faith.⁹

The word conscience appears 29 times in the NT of the NKJV; this means that it is of great consequence. The word 'justify' only appears 9 times and 'justification' only 3 times; yet justification is the bedrock of the Gospel. Some important doctrines, such as the Trinity, do not have any specific reference at all. Thus 'conscience' is very significant.

Now I am not going to talk about the obvious connotation, about being righteous and obeying God's law. That is clear to all sound believers; you must obey your conscience and do good, not evil. I must presume that you understand sanctification.

What I want to affirm very strongly is the need to obey your conscience even when it puts you in conflict with other Christians and with churches. You must never disobey your conscience or evil will result.

I have lost count of the number of times I have had to go against some leader's counsel, some church policy, some doctrine of a respected theologian and so on because my conscience was disturbed by them. After nearly fifty years serving the Lord I can say that I have stayed true to my conscience and have paid very dearly for doing so.

At the end of the day you are a servant of your Master in heaven, not some man on earth. You are accountable to the Lord and not some church.

An extreme example of getting this wrong can be seen in the Jonestown massacre. Scores of supposed, gullible Christians committed suicide and murder at the behest of their church leader. They must have disobeyed their consciences. Now church leaders disparage the use of this extreme example as being nothing at all like them, and that may be so; however, the principle still applies. I have seen countless sincere people obey a church leader in doing things that were opposed to God's laws or programme; it happens all the time. It may not be murder, but it is often wrong. In authoritarian Charismatic churches men constantly appropriate to themselves authority that only God has. Such should not be followed.

Let me give you an example. Many years ago, long before the Toronto Blessing, I was in a leader's meeting of 400 men. We listened to an African Charismatic preacher whom I was very suspicious of; everyone else was in awe of him. After preaching he got everybody up and walked around knocking people to the ground as if this was the power of God. I did not understand as much about this phenomenon then as I do today but I did not trust it. At my feet two of the most famous church leaders in the country had fallen to the ground and were out cold. Only one timid man in the far corner of the room was also standing. I decided that if the Lord wanted me to fall over he could do it very easily, but if it was a man's ploy I wasn't interested – so I put one foot behind the other to steady me. Wallop; the man hit me hard in the forehead and I jolted but did not fall over due to the stance. He glared at me with what I can only call an evil stare. 398 people, including many significant church leaders, were on the floor, only I was standing at the front of the meeting (plus the other guy a long way off). The peer pressure on me was enormous, but I stood firm because my conscience demanded it. Today I know that I did the right thing and 398 church leaders capitulated to something evil and of the flesh. The preacher died not long afterwards quite young.

⁹ 1 Tim 1:19, 'having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck'.

What you submit to moulds you. If you submit to men in a wrong way (there is a right way) then you will be damaged and it will affect your character. If you submit to God you will be strengthened; your conscience will be transformed, renewed and made stronger, and you will be wiser.

Paul followed his conscience when he was determined to go to Jerusalem despite the pleas of the brethren and various church leaders. He knew he was going to be placed in chains but went anyway. Sometimes, even good men, acting sincerely, will be wrong; it is then that you must follow your conscience and obey God.

On the Day of Judgment God will ask why you didn't obey your conscience; he will not ask why you did or didn't obey men (unless they were truly godly and in the Spirit).

Make good friends

Prepare for rejection

Good lifelong friends are a great blessing, but they are hard to come by. I find it sad that my oldest friends are non-believers; this needs discussion.

You need to get your head around the fact that, over time, you will face rejection. Why do I say this? 1) Because it is true. 2) Because Jesus warned us that it would happen. 3) Jesus and the apostles all experienced this.

I have heard it said by multiple numbers of believers, and most leaders that I have known, that non-Christian friends do not stab you in the back as badly as Christian friends. I still find it shocking that supposed Christian friends can behave in a manner that would shock the world. For proof of this just look at the venom on the internet written by supposed Christians about other supposed Christians. I have lost count of the number of times that I have been betrayed and rejected by people that I spent a lot of time doing good to.

Now this has something to do with satanic opposition. The devil will do anything to stop a person growing in Christ and often developing some antagonism to an edifying friend is a means of doing this. Someone runs well, you do all you can to support them, they grow in grace, then they suddenly find some silly reason to be offended and they leave you. I have noted that often this led to a person's ruin. In some cases I have seen a person walk away and later apostatise; I have seen their circumstances fall apart; in other cases I have even seen them die young.

It is just a fact that, at some point, you will be disappointed by fellow believers. It may be worse and you may be rejected, reviled and slandered. If you have lived long and have not experienced this, thank God for his providence – you are unusual.

Because Jesus and the apostles warned us about this we should not be taken by surprise; indeed we should prepare ourselves.

When I first experienced this, and suffered a great injustice by a pastor, I was mortified because I did not expect it and was not prepared. It took me a long time to get over this. When it happens now (it still does from time to time because teachers experience it frequently) I take it in my stride and move on, understanding that this is part of suffering as a minister of Christ. You have to let friendships go when the friend becomes an enemy. Do all that you can to avoid this, be as patient and long-suffering as possible; continually commit them to God, but in the end you have to let them go, and move on. God will make up for the loss.

When you are a young Christian you think that all the brethren should be united in Christ because they have one life and one Spirit, living in one body and have the experience of God's love. Indeed, it should be that way. Sadly, many believers do not know how to walk in the new nature and their old nature overcomes them and they act in the flesh. It is then when friendships are severed and damaged.

Good friends

These are those people who stick with you, despite whatever offence may arise. They forgive each other and are patient with each other. They do not believe bad reports without talking to the person first. They are true and honest. They support you when you are down and come to you for help when they are in trouble.

They become friends to your children and edify them. They help you in practical difficulties and even make sacrifices to do so. They defend you when others insult you. In times of trial, they are your first line of support after God.

Really good friends become like brothers or sisters. Many years on they still remain good friends, even if you see them rarely due to distance.

All Christian relationships should be like this, but sadly few are.

So choose your friends well. Develop friendships with those acquaintances that are solid in the faith. Be wary of people trying to take advantage of you – it will happen often.

Trust God but not men

It may be a sad fact, but do not trust anyone unless you are certain of their character. I have lost count of the number of people I trusted only to be badly let down.

In the world it is a sheer fact that people are not to be trusted due to sin. Don't learn the hard way, do not entrust anything in your life to people: family, possessions, money – anything. If someone is in need, give them what they need in God's name (if you can). Do not trust something to people unless you are prepared for the consequences. Your possessions belong to God; be responsible with them.

It took me quite a while to realise that this applied to believers. I repeatedly lent things to believers, including church leaders, only for them to be lost, never given back or returned ruined. In many cases though I was poor, I lent stuff to people who were more affluent, and they abused that trust.

Yes we should trust other believers, but so many today do not know how to live in the new man, in the Spirit, and bad things happen.

For example, I lent an obscure book to a church leader. After many months I asked for it back; he said he had never received it. I was unable to replace it for a long time. I lent a rare book to someone else; it was returned covered in ink and having been through a washing machine cycle. I once lent my only guitar (I was very poor then) to someone who returned it having broken the neck and said nothing but glued it on with araldite. On first playing the neck broke in half. Another Christian borrowed a number of my books for a college dissertation; I never received any of them back and have never been able to replace some of them. I once loaned my valuable collection of stamps, collected when young, to a brother; he never gave them back.

Today, if someone asks to borrow a certain book, I purchase it for them and give it freely. This solves many possible problems.

Christ is bigger than your social circle

If you can focus yourself completely on Christ, resting in him alone, you will survive. If you are centred in your social life and need your friends, you are at risk. I have lost count of the number of people I know who have remained in a dead or even apostate church because their whole social life revolved around that church and nothing else.

Often the social circle is really about being accepted in a peer group of some sort and does not represent a group of close friends.

Over and over I have seen a social group appear to be a group of close friends until suddenly something happens and they become like rats leaving a sinking ship. People you thought were close to you abandon you for some ulterior motive. Often this follows when someone confronts church leaders about errors. Those still loyal to the leaders desert the confronter, despite formerly being 'close' friends, even if the confronter is correct and the leader wrong.

During the period of the Toronto Blessing fanaticism, many churches split, families split, and friends separated over the issue of this false phenomenon. Loyalty to something false overrode loyalty to a friend. Often this was due to being centred in the social circle based in that church, which was too difficult to leave. Friendship thus became expendable. I saw people that had been friends for decades separate when one of them quite rightly declared that Toronto was a false experience.

True friendship should be able to weather the storms of life and controversies; however, it is just a fact that such good friendship is rare today.

Life is short - prioritise

When you are younger you get tired of old people telling you how quickly life passes; but they were telling you the truth. Indeed the Bible affirms this time after time; life is but a mist that soon vanishes or grass that grows quickly, then is cut and burned.

Since life is short, you must learn how to prioritise your time. This is something that we all struggle with when young.

There are two types of mistake. The first is not to give the Lord the proper priority in your life. The second is that you give religious things too much priority in your life and end up disobeying God.

Family

Putting God and the kingdom first is an important lesson to learn. We must give God his dues, such as prayer, worship, Bible reading, fellowship, service and so on. However, we also put God first when we do what God commands. One command is to be responsible and look after your family, working hard to support them.

Far too many people make a mess of this by neglecting their family or their work in order to serve the church. Now it is a bad church that puts such pressure on men so that this results, but this is commonplace I'm afraid. In thinking that they are serving God, some men sacrificially serve their church (that uncaringly puts growing responsibility upon them) and neglect their wife, their children and perhaps even their bills. This is wrong.

I have lost count of the people who continued to do this for whatever reason. I found myself in this situation when I was younger and more stupid. I not only unintentionally

neglected my family for a while, I also damaged my health with my arduous service. Don't get me wrong, I loved my family, provided for them, and did everything I could for them, but my time was stretched beyond my capacity to cope due to pressures put upon me by the church I was in, which was authoritarian, demanding and unthinking. I eventually first resigned leadership and then left that church.

Sadly I have seen people continue to neglect their family for decades in such churches. In fact, I have seen famous leaders seriously neglect their families to the point of abuse. The eldest son of one famous leader was so badly hurt by his father's continual absences from home that he became a teenage alcoholic and I had to help him get through it. How could a supposedly wise church leader fail to see the damage he caused at home to his wife and children by leaving them alone constantly?

Now some bad churches will tell you that Biblical priorities descend from God to church to ministry to family and then lesser things. This is wrong. Biblical priorities are God first; family second (and that includes stable employment) and church is third; then other things.

Your family is part of the kingdom, which must come first after God himself. How can you be serving God well if you put the church first (as a part of the kingdom) but neglect your family (which is a closer part of the kingdom)?

Wider family

Wider family is still family. So many people today make a big mistake about this. I have lost count of the number of Christians, including leaders, who have sorely neglected their wider family, subjugating them to church responsibilities.

It is a disgrace that Christian people can waste time doing unnecessary church responsibilities but neglect sick grandmothers or aunts, or worse, neglect aged parents. Yet this is shockingly common.

This is sin, pure and simple. In fact God judges severely those who do not fulfil their responsibilities to family.¹⁰

Do not be tempted to neglect your family in order to pursue ministry within the church. Your family comes first. Minister after you have fulfilled your family obligations.

Necessary rest

When you are young you push yourself to all sorts of limits – this does you no good and you will pay for it later.

It is necessary for you to ensure that you get sufficient sleep and sufficient relaxation. This is a necessity of your physical body.

I confess my failure in this. For years I did without much sleep and worked ridiculously. I worked at my job up to 12 hours a day and Saturday mornings. I had three children to bring up. I was in the process of completely rebuilding my house from top to bottom of necessity – this meant DIY until the early hours and all vacations. On top of all this, I was either leading a church or in leadership of a bigger church. During this period I did not sleep properly for eight years due to the birth of children that did not sleep well (four hours

¹⁰ 1 Tim 5:6, 'But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever'.

was normal). Needless to say, my health began to crumble in my thirties and worse in my forties.

For example, during the late 70s early 80s, I had no proper bathroom, no floor in the kitchen, a multitude of other vital DIY jobs, and two children (one a baby); yet I was preaching two or three times a week and having 30 people meet in my house as well as counselling – oh, and I was working long hours as well. I was young, zealous and stupid. Somehow God brought me through all that and knew that I was doing it unto him – but I should have cared for my body better.

Do good to all

There is great joy in doing good; it brings its own reward. God is pleased when you do good to people and this testifies to a genuine witness of your life to God.

Doing good is an adventure. Day by day you can gain new understanding of ways to do good because there is so much suffering and need in the world.

The Christian is called to do good to all and not just to the church, though the brethren have priority in our do-gooding. You are to let your good works shine before men so that they see them.¹¹ People need to see that Christians do good.

The idea that our good and our giving are only centred in the church is a big mistake. We are not to place all our giving only in our church and let the leadership get on with it. We must give as God directs us on a regular basis. We must not take away the sovereignty of God in determining where our money goes. If you give the church all your spare money then God calls you to give to a poor neighbour, how will you do it?

Apart from all that, Christians must never give their money to a church that spends it on the expenses of buying and maintaining a building. That is just sin.

Look for opportunities to do good to all, and especially your local neighbours. Let people know that you are a doer of good. This gains trust that can then be used to proclaim the Gospel to a willing ear.

Proclaim your faith whenever the opportunity arises

God gives us opportunities for us to make the most of conversations so that we can put over the gospel message in a normal manner. This is how the gospel spreads.

I am opposed to those ardent folk who try to preach the Gospel hard in every possible conversation. I once, as his manager and his Christian brother, had to speak to a Christian at work who was distressing staff by constantly going up to them while they were working and saying things like, *'Are you covered in the Blood?'*

Badgering and harassing people does not produce a good work. Yet if we pray for opportunities and grasp them when they come, we can find that we witness as God leads us in a natural way. Particularly if we are already doing good to the person in some way.

¹¹ Matt 5:16, 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven'.

When I was first saved I was a zealous badgerer. I forcefully twisted conversation with friends and family round to demanding they consider the claims of God. Such behaviour is quite common in young believers and eventually the truth sinks in that we must work for our opportunities to talk to people; we must first gain their trust and speak as God gives us grace. Hitting people over the head with the Gospel does little good.

And yet we must still take our opportunities and not let them slip by. We must make the most of our conversations but must first commit folk to God in prayer before we say anything at all.

Find your gift and work

This may take you some time but the journey of finding your work for God will be interesting.

God gives every believer a certain gift; a means of glorifying him in a special way. The beauty of the church is that when we all come together we share these manifestations of Christ to produce a united and complete picture. It is a travesty when churches fail their obligations to the body and squash the personal ministry of all, subsisting on one man's ministry. This is not church at all. The church is all about *koinonia* ('fellowship') and one-anothering; in other words, mutual edification. I will ignore the temptation to wax lyrical on this important subject now.

Some people are given more than one gift, and such folk are usually leaders. But whether you have one gift or five, your obligation to God is to share that gift to glorify Christ.

After your conversion, you should seek God constantly to understand what your gift is. At the same time do all you can to help the brethren in whatever way crops up. Over time you will find that you begin to excel at a certain thing; in fact people will tell you that you are gifted in this or that. Eventually, the gift will become clearer and you should try to grow in that gift and use it as much as possible.

I was fortunate in that I was called to teach on a subject in a college Christian Union within two weeks of my conversion. Admittedly this is unusual but it just happens to be what happen to me. Soon I was preaching and counselling in college meetings and church plus I began writing teaching material for my own purposes. Before long I was joining up the two, teaching believers in church and writing material to help them understand stuff. In those days my writings were reproduced on a spirit-based carbon copy machine; this was even before photocopiers!

Your journey will be different. You may have the gift of helping others, or excel in hospitality; it matters little what the gift is so long as you use the talent that God gave you.

Some gifts become church work. Those who teach will become teachers and elders. Those gifted in preaching the Gospel will become evangelists. Those able to organise methodically will become deacons and treasurers. However, many gifts are not formal church work but are expressed within the church all the same; such as making meals for the saints, ministering to the sick, counselling the immature, helping young mothers, caring for widows, or offering homeless people a home.

Don't be aimless. Find your calling in God and share your gift to the full. Whatever grace God gives you, share it with others as quickly as possible.

Don't let the world form your views surreptitiously

Everything that goes on in the world is a means of the devil to undermine you in some way or another. Get used to the fact that we are at war; many simply do not understand this at all.

From the devil's side, this war is constant; it never stops at trying to tear you down. Most believers meander through life with not the faintest understanding of this warfare.

Wherever you are in the world the devil is trying to form your views through a constant propaganda. Some of this is objective propaganda channelled through the events of the day: politicians, the media and brainwashing; however, there is a more subjective propaganda that just emanates from every pore of society.

You watch a movie, no sin involved, but over and over again themes are portrayed that are trying to change your moral and psychological position in subtle ways. You read a newspaper and again themes come across in the subtext of what is written. You go to work and demands are made of you that seek to alter your world viewpoint. Non-Christian friends also, without knowing it, try to affect your ethical position.

Temptation is everywhere. It screams at you through the television, and especially in adverts. It leaps out from huge posters on the side of buildings. It confronts you in the way that the opposite sex dresses in the street. You check out YouTube channels for information and adverts pop up that were unexpected. You scan a magazine in a dentist surgery and are shocked at the images you find. We could go on and on.

Almost everything in the world is designed by the enemy to have some sort of effect upon you and most people just accept this and do nothing. Try saying 'No'; an inward realisation of what is going on and rejecting it.

One means of dealing with this is asking the Lord to wash you with the water of the word. This is not a cleansing from sin, which is by the blood of Christ; no, this is a refreshing of the spirit, a renewing of the mind as God applies his word to your soul and washes away the dust of the day.

This is what was typified by Jesus washing the disciple's feet. This was not a washing of the whole man because they were already cleansed. This was a refreshing from the dust that had gathered upon them from walking in the world. This is the washing of the water of the word.

If we do not wash away the day's propaganda, influence and temptation, it grows and becomes baggage for our soul. This is just one reason why prayer should occur at morning and in the night.

Be careful how you communicate

In the past people spoke face-to-face pragmatically, or in certain situations they wrote a carefully considered letter. In today's world we have telephones, mobile 'phones, social media, emails and all sorts.

What happens today is that people communicate quickly, in a hurry and rarely seriously consider important communications. It is now commonplace for a person to be told that

their relationship has been broken up by a short text on a cell-phone. Stories abound of sending messages to the wrong person; lambasting someone by text, email or Facebook when moments later they regret it; having an important conversation on a mobile 'phone while doing something else, and thus not giving proper attention to what is said.

All of these modern technologies provide greater means of doing really bad things to other people in a casual and ill-considered manner. Christians should be very careful to avoid such things and deal with relationship issues face-to-face or in a carefully thought-through letter (even if sent electronically).

Even with emails, which at least give the opportunity for more considered thought than texts, messages, Twitter or mobiles while on the run, there is still the possibility of exacerbating a relationship problem instead of healing it.

When dealing with a problem in fellowship do all you can to sort it out in a personal conversation in a relaxed setting. If this is impossible (e.g. due to distance) be very careful in the conversations by phone; never do anything rash on a mobile while doing something else, speak to the person on a landline sitting down. If the conversation is being conducted by email, read your email three times before pushing the 'send' button and be very careful. Emails can so easily be read the wrong way by someone.

I once had to deal with a very difficult discipline issue with a brother by emails. He was too far away to visit and he had behaved badly on telephone calls. I thought that laying out the issue rationally and clearly in emails would help him see his sin. In hindsight I think that using emails made it harder for him to see his need of repentance and made him react even more. In the end, after repeated kind admonitions, I had to sever contact with this brother and his end was tragic. I wish I could have had time with him conversationally face-to-face, but circumstances did not allow for that at the time. This experience showed me that doing absolutely everything possible for personal conversation in such matters was necessary.

Modern technology may have many beneficial advantages, but it seems that it often has many relationship pitfalls too. Be wary.

Spend as much time as you can enjoying the natural world that God made

The reason that people find peace in Bushcraft and Survival situations (we used to call it camping!) is because they gain a real sense of peace and harmony with nature, which does them good.

I will say this, there is even great physical benefit from being in the outdoors and getting sunshine. A mere twenty minutes of sunshine gives you your vitamin D for that day, which powers the immune system; but there are more benefits than that. Ignore the rubbish about skin cancer, simply be sensible and wear appropriate clothing. Getting sunburned is obviously dangerous but the people that spend long periods in the outdoors, such as gardeners, are the healthiest people around. Remember that God is a gardener; it must be good for us.

But beyond the physical benefits of being outdoors, there are big moral, psychological and spiritual benefits also.

I have heard of dementia and depression patients becoming healthy again after spending time outdoors.

The reason there is a spiritual benefit is that in the wild you are surrounding yourself with life that is submitted to God. Yes nature is groaning in tribulation, but that is because of the sin of man. Nature is constantly being damaged by human beings (pollution, destruction, warfare, pesticides, herbicides, wanton destruction etc.).

Of themselves, natural things are just doing God's will. God told trees to soak up water and nutrients, convert it by sunshine through photosynthesis, soak up carbon dioxide and convert it into new tree life, growth and oxygen. Trees just obey God. I love trees. Walking through woods is just exhilarating and joyful. My greatest sadness is being unable to do this now due to health and pragmatic issues (though I can walk along Worthing beach, which is not quite as good).

Birds just do what God told them and achieve miracles, such as flying thousands of miles in migration, returning from Africa to the same roosting spot in Britain. Sadly, I see few birds where I live due to many cats, dogs and passers by. However, a few weeks ago a Fieldfare¹² came into my garden looking for worms. What it was doing in a suburb away from the flock beats me; but I treated it as a gift from God and it filled me with joy.

When you immerse yourself in the outdoors and nature you are close to God. Not in a revelatory way but in fellowship with his creatures. There is nothing pantheistic about this; it is enjoying God's creation.

Most people spend their whole time being immersed in the world that constantly spits out satanic propaganda and temptation. Some people rarely go for walks in the countryside and spend most of their downtime in front of a television big screen soaking up whatever the world throws at them.

When I commuted by car to an office far away I would leave in the dark and return in the dark apart from a few weeks in the summer. I would be either driving or in meetings all day, working long hours. Such a life is not conducive to peace and I was under great stress that created health issues. Unfortunately I had no choice at the time, having a mortgage and a family. Getting away from this and walking in a wood, or over the Downs, or along the beach was a different as night and day. Even when I was a dirt-poor student my family went on buses into local parks or the nearby countryside every weekend. Hiking was commonplace.

Now my advice is that everyone ought to spend as much time in the countryside as possible. Yes this can be difficult for some (and for me now) but the benefits are huge. Being amongst nature cleanses the soul from all the rubbish that is thrown at us in the world. On top of this, God often speaks to us when our mind is clear and we are at peace watching a Skylark rise up in the air or a Treecreeper clamber down a tree.

One of the most awe-inspiring points of my life was being alone in the garden of a cottage in Wales watching the sun go down over the Black Mountains with nothing but fields, cows and trees between me and the distant hills. If that doesn't drive you to worship, nothing will.

¹² A large thrush. This species breeds in wooded areas across much of the central and northern parts of Europe and western Asia, migrating to milder areas for the winter. They are mainly brown-grey in colour, with a paler rump and speckled underparts, with a very long tail. They feed on berries and insects, often on open farmland and usually nest in colonies.

Nature is good for you in every way.

Learn submission to God

This is perhaps the best piece of advice above all – learn to submit completely to God.

Now this sounds simple and obvious, but it is not. Far too much in church life is based upon ‘what I want’. We are so conditioned by nature and this world that even as Christians we often fail to see that we are trying to put over our desires on to God’s plan. We spend far too little time in simply submitting to God and worshipping.

For example: most Christian churches in the western world these days are centred upon supposed power religion, upon signs and wonders and upon healing. Some leaders have made millions out of pretending to have a healing ministry and the crowds that flock to their celebrations show that there is no shortage of Christians focused upon healing above all else.

Now this is new in church history; this sort of thing never happened in mainstream evangelicalism until the late 19th century in America, and especially after 1948 in Pentecostal revivalism. Before the modern era Christians would accept their situation, no matter how harsh, and worship God in submission, believing that God is in control of our lives and visits us with suffering for good reasons.¹³ This is the lesson of the book of Job. Everywhere the Bible tells us that God controls disease and allows people to suffer according to his divine purposes.¹⁴

As a result of the heresies of Pentecostal healers, and Charismatic signs and wonders fanatics, many Christians believe that God automatically wants every person healthy and fit; that healing is in the atonement as a privilege to be claimed; that a lack of healing is the fault of the sick person who hasn’t enough faith, and so on.

Now God may heal on occasion, when it is necessary, and praying for healing is not a bad thing; but before this must be a prior acceptance of God’s sovereignty and thankfulness of God’s control of my circumstances. Even Jesus prayed, ‘If it be thy will’, before he asked for escape from pain.

Throughout history many godly believers have maintained an excellent testimony despite being riddled with sickness or debility. In fact, many of the greatest men of God have been very sick people who died young (e.g. Luther, Calvin, Spurgeon). What is first necessary above all is acquiescence to the will of God in my life. I must submit to God in his control of my circumstances and not rage against them.

Far too much prayer in modern Christians is really based upon selfishness. We are far too preoccupied with our problems and praying to make them change. Constantly Christians pray that God would change this or that but far fewer Christians thank God for bad things. Worse still is the common misconception that bad things arise from the devil, and thus some folk rebuke them, when the Bible shows us that all things come from God, including the ‘bad’ things.¹⁵

¹³ As I recall, Frances Ridley Havergal was asked what God’s will was. She replied that, for her, God’s will was that she was bedridden and coughed.

¹⁴ For example: Exod 4:11; Jn 9:2-3, 11:4.

¹⁵ Isa 45:7, Lam 3:23, Amos 3:6.

A godly man does not constantly rail and moan about his circumstances and then preoccupy his prayers with petitions to remove obstacles. A godly man trusts in God, does not fret and thanks God for difficulties. Only after worship does he pray for things to change. If things do not change he stops asking about this matter and settles down to calmly accept the will of God, just as Paul had to accept his troubling eye condition.

Now this is not an easy place for man to be and far too many of us preached God's sovereignty while at the same time constantly fretting about our God-given circumstances. The hypocrisy is obvious.

So, my advice is to really understand and accept God's sovereignty; not just as an abstract theological concept, but as real in your own life. When you have mastered this you have mastered yourself.

Conclusion

I will stop at this point or it will just be an older man ranting and rambling. In the simplest terms, my advice for disciples is this:

- Focus upon Jesus above all else. Constantly keep him and his commands before your eyes.
- Seek to glorify God in all that you think, say and do. Fear him above anything else.
- Find ways to worship in the secret place alone.
- Be filled with the Spirit always; pray to be filled every morning.
- Give away, as soon as possible, all that God gives you; whether it be wisdom, knowledge, a gift or prosperity. Grace given away will be replaced with more grace.
- Make sure that you give thanks constantly.
- Find ways to do good to all, and especially your brethren.
- Don't love the world.

If you abound in these things, you will do well.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
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