

... always be ready to give a defense [Greek, *apologia*]  
to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ... 1 PETER 3:15

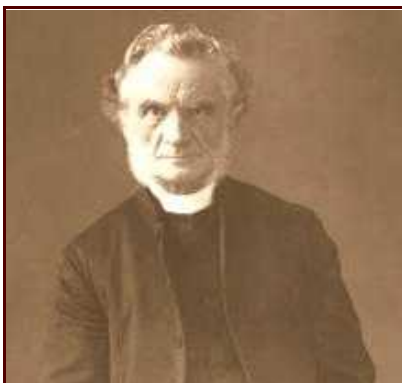
# Weaners, workers and wise guys

## *Testing our level of Bible literacy*

By DAVID ASPINALL

A N ordinary camera will give you a decent picture, good enough to make out the foreground. Which, after all, is what most of us want to see. A great camera, however, will give you less contrast and a lot more colour or black and white gradations, even subtle shades. And a lot more detail too. A great camera will simply give you a more faithful picture. You will see what's in the foreground even better, and what's behind you might see for the first time.

So it is with Bible teachers. The good expositor is the good camera, but only the exegete – the much-maligned “Bible scholar” – can show you the subtle shades, the greyscales, the background and the detail which often change



**BROOKE FOSS WESTCOTT  
(1825-1901)**

One of the most revered AND despised of New Testament exegetes. Despised by fundamentalists (eg King James only), revered by Bible exegetes and theologians. Revered AND despised by Jehovah's Witnesses – few know he was a bishop of 'Babylon the great', yet for their NT they are completely dependent on the scholarship of Westcott and fellow 'Babylonian' and Cambridge scholar FJA Hort.

the 'picture' completely. The background changes the context. And the Devil is in the details. So it is in the Devil's best interest to get us as far from Bible scholars as possible. The best cameras usually cost the most. The best Bible scholars have paid the price to see the detail and the subtlety. They have usually spent their entire lives on the quest for “wisdom from above”. From the Devil's perspective they are dangerous. They know too much. They *know* the whole picture as well as any human can know it.

Those who work hard in preaching and teaching, Paul says to Timothy, are worthy of double honour (1 Tim. 5:17). The church has traditionally recognized this principle by financially supporting those whose gifts in teaching have been outstanding. Such “gifts in men” have therefore been freed to apply their talents to the benefit of the church. But there is a problem. Most Christians are almost totally unaware who these great teachers are. We may have heard of John Hagee, Dave Hunt and Hal Lindsey. And seen their videos, read their books. But the names James Stalker, H. R. Mackintosh and even B.F. Westcott will draw blank stares from most of us. And even if the names are familiar, most often we have never read a word they wrote. Are we out of touch with these “gifts in men” – the great teachers the Lord has given the church?

*For though by this time you ought to be teachers ... you have come to need milk, not solid food ... – Heb 5:12*

It is a great irony of our time. Never have Christians had so many teaching resources available to them. Yet never has the appetite for spiritual meat been so lacking. It is beyond ironic. It is disastrous.

The author of Hebrews, writing to Jews who were at eternal risk, pulls no punches in trying to awaken his audience from their slumber. “So we must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it. The message delivered through angels [the law of Moses] has always proved true, and the people were punished for every violation of the law and every act of disobedience. What makes us think we can escape if we are indifferent to this great salvation which was announced by the Lord Jesus himself?” (Heb. 2:1-3, New Living Translation)

The Hebrews had let their hearts grow cold. How are our hearts? One sure measure of our heart's temperature is our appetite. "You must crave pure spiritual milk so that you can grow into the fullness of your salvation. Cry out for this nourishment as a baby cries for milk, now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness." (1 Peter 2:1-3, NLT)

## ARE WE WEANERS – OR WORKERS?

Peter and the author of Hebrews leave us with the unmistakable impression that most Christians in their immediate audience were still not weaned from the milk of mother. They could not yet be teachers, for they were still in a state of utter dependence. They could not be effective workers in the church, for they were still not wise. If they learned to walk with the wise, they might yet become wise workers.

But if they continued unweaned, they risked even more than perpetual childhood. As Paul sternly warns the Corinthians (who foolishly regarded themselves as spiritually wise), "I could not speak to you as to spiritual people, but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal" (1 Cor 3:1-3, NKJV). Carnal Christians, Paul goes on to warn, will inevitably be divided Christians. For they will always be followers, never leaders. And baby, carnal, dependent Christians CAN only be – at best – as wise, as pure, as stable, as fruitful as their teachers. On the other hand,

### J.Gresham Machen on pulling down empires

America's foremost apologist warned of the church's anti-intellectual stance at the opening of Princeton Seminary in 1912. He said, "The church is perishing today through the lack of thinking, not through an excess of it." He foresaw the danger of intellectual isolation: "What is today matter of academic speculation, begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires."



as perpetual dependents, they can also be as deceived and duped as their teachers are. – see Ephesians 4:8ff.

In the 20+ years since I left The Watchtower, I have been forced to acknowledge a stinging reality. The level of biblical literacy among Jehovah's Witnesses is actually higher than among Christians. Knowledge, of course, does not guarantee understanding. But without knowledge, understanding is impossible. The phenomenon one continually observes when looking at cults is paralleled in conservative churches. There is a generally high level of biblical literacy – knowledge of names and facts – but a leveling off, an upper limit of learning which stands in marked contrast to mainstream Christianity. This upper limit, almost inevitable for the non-professional, acts as an impenetrable ceiling, effectively rendering invisible the 'attic' above, where Christian scholars labour unknown to most below. In cults this ignorance is understandable. The arrogance which often accompanies 'little knowledge' is indeed dangerous. Cultists may be excused for believing that no one knows better than they do – they have likely never been exposed to Christian scholars. The same, unfortunately, is also true of millions of conservative Christians – but with much less excuse.

True, in mainline churches, the average level of Bible literacy is notably lower than in evangelical and fundamentalist churches. Yet conversely the scholarship of leadership is dramatically higher. Indeed, the highest levels of sophistication in Old and New Testaments scholarship are almost a monopoly of older denominations, where university standards have been the norm for many generations. In contrast, evangelical scholarship is a recent phenomenon.

## TESTING OUR BIBLE UNDERSTANDING

These general observations setting the stage, we can begin to be more specific as to our personal progress on the learning curve of Christian discipleship. The chart below is an attempt to compare the biblical literacy levels of Christians, cultists and non-believers. On a scale of 10, where would YOU place yourself on the learning curve?

## Are YOU a weaner, a worker or a wise guy?

Level	The LEARNING CURVE of DISCIPLESHIP
10	published, translated biblical exegetes, (today a Ph. D., D.D. in prior generations) at world class universities, seminaries. Authority transcends denominational ties. Nowadays likely to be specialists (eg Pentateuch, John or Luke specialists). Universally recognized scholars (does not mean they would be honoured among anti-intellectuals, fundamentalists)
9	theologians, exegetes (Greek & perhaps Hebrew proficiency), teach at denominational seminaries, perhaps published by parochial sources (D.D., Th. D, Th. M., perhaps Ph.D)
8	usually seminary training, but dependent on 9,10 for specifics; most pastors (M.A., M. Div.); many evangelists (Billy Graham, Charles Colson); most popular apologists, cult 'experts'; will have attained proficiency in NT, OT intro, church history
7	some pastors (mostly fundamentalist), well-read laymen (B.A level); TV evangelists, even cultists and unbelievers can sometimes be 7 or even 8 in Bible knowledge (ie proof-texting), but biggest difference from 8 = don't know what – or even THAT – they don't know (not in touch with 9,10). Generally dependent on some pet teachers, and if keen on personal research, on internet sources rather than accredited teachers
6	many evangelical laymen, general knowledge of Bible history & doctrine, often used as workers in churches (eg Sunday School). Read little, thus totally dependent on pastors and/or 2 <sup>nd</sup> hand information
5	most churchgoers in mainstream denominations, little specific knowledge of names, places and dates; often confused as to theology (can't distinguish sources – Word or world?)
4	most unbelievers; know some facts, more misinformation. Unfortunately, as with 5 and 6, will be "blown about by every wind"

If you are still unsure where you rate on the learning curve, here are a few tests which might help to mark the difference between the above levels as to sophistication of Bible understanding.

### The Diotrephes test

Give yourself a 7 if you know who Diotrephes is. Give yourself an 8 if you know in which Bible book his name occurs. Give yourself an 8.5 if you know what most NT scholars say about the historical problem associated with the name Diotrephes. Give yourself a 9 if you know what some recent Johannine scholars are saying is **at least** as likely to be the tension between the apostle and Diotrephes.

### The Revelation test

Give yourself a 6 if you know what Jack Van Impe and most “prophecy teachers” say about the 7-headed, 10-horned beast of Revelation. Give yourself 7 if you know among which of the following teachers this viewpoint is common: a. postmillennial; b. amillennial; c. premillennial; d. dispensational. Give yourself 8 if you know which book, which chapter is the OT source for this vision. Give yourself 9 if you know which of the following Revelation commentators would be most likely to agree with the Van Impe interpretation: Charles, Walvoord, Ladd, Caird, Beasley-Murray, Stott, Kuyper. Morris.

### The Genesis test

Give yourself 7 if you know who Henry Morris is. Give yourself 8 if you are aware of what most modern commentators agree is the main purpose of Genesis chapter one. Give yourself 9 if you can list the following Genesis commentators in chronological sequence: Delitzsch, Leupold, Calvin, Lange, Luther, Wenham, von Rad, Griffith Thomas, Pink., Driver.

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No one who cannot pass the above tests should be humiliated. Merely humbled. These samples of the depth of understanding of the teachers of the church should motivate us to ask questions about the sources we all ultimately depend upon. At the very least we should be motivated to ask ourselves how solid OUR sources are. Are we dependent on internet, as so many Christians seem to be? If so, let us realize that many internet sources pass on, without accountability, information which does not have the benefit of close editing, fact checking or – too

often – even the pretense of balanced research and analysis. This, we must realize, contrasts with the academic standards of the best seminaries and universities, where accountability and balance are built into the system. Among the first things one notices when reading the scholars rated 9 or 10 in the above chart is their caution, balance and – another contrast with often partisan internet sites – truly humble in their awareness of the limits of ANY knowledge of documents removed from us by millennia.

Despite these built-in limitations, thanks to the life-sacrificing labours of such Christian scholars, we have available to us more knowledge of the Bible and its world than ever before. Let us resolve to honour such teachers by keeping in touch with the fruits of theological research, exegesis and exposition.

*... by this time you ought to be teachers ...* Heb. 5:12

But let us also balance that admonition with the caution of James, who warns us of the eternal danger of the undisciplined mind and the ungoverned tongue ...

*Not many of you should be teachers, brothers, for we shall receive a heavier judgment.* James 3:1

For an annotated list of the great teachers of Christ's church see the tract

He Gave Teachers