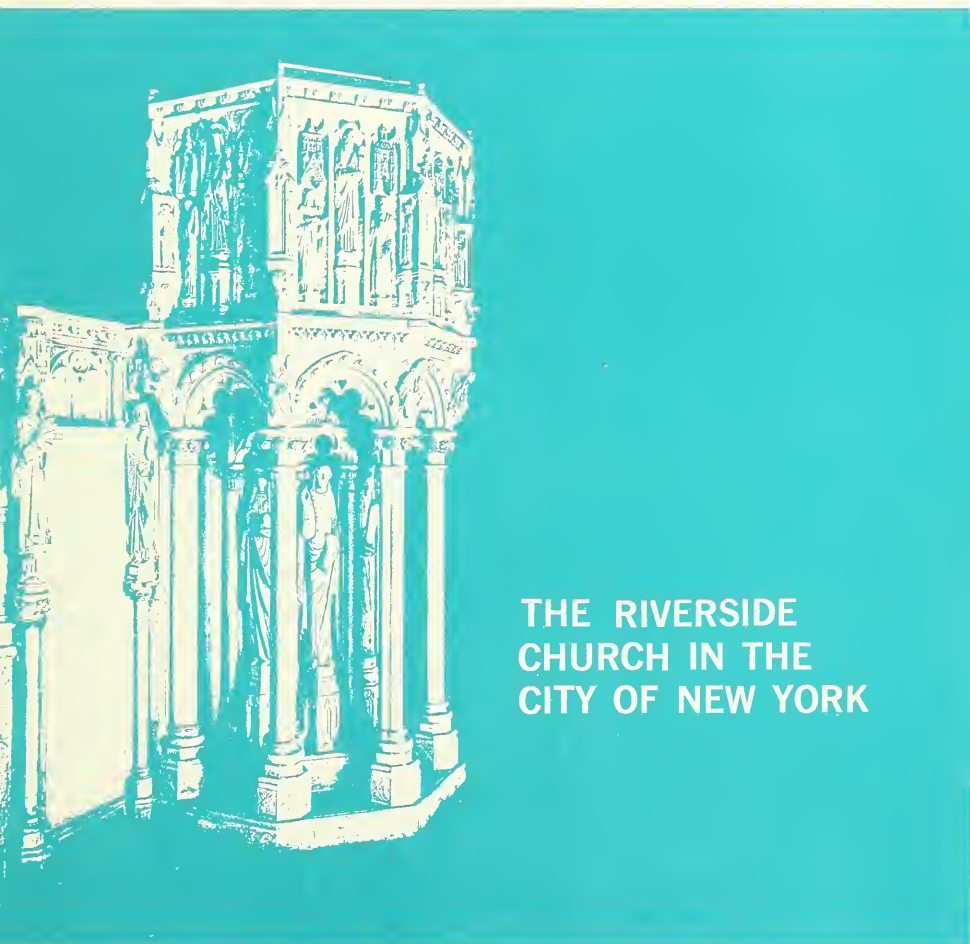


# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


THE ROMANCE OF THE BIBLE

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE  
CHURCH IN THE  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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## THE ROMANCE OF THE BIBLE

I am your Bible. You know me well -- at least you know about me. I come in a variety of styles and sizes. One of my larger editions can usually be seen in some prominent position in your sanctuaries. Some of you, as brides, carried me down the aisle on your wedding day. Your presidents rest a hand upon me when they take the solemn oath of office. Not a few of you searched my pages frantically on the eve of major surgery. But now that you are well you have shelved me -- and gone on to other things.

I was with your astronauts when they rendezvoused in outer space. You find me present on the road in motels and hotels across the land. You have me in your homes. I have accompanied innumerable mourners to a freshly dug grave. Companioned prisoners in the desolation of their cells. Instilled hope in the hearts of your fighting men captured behind the lines.

I beg you, do not think me immodest when I say that there is little doubt that I have been more influential in creating western civilization than any other book!

\* \* \*

I said a moment ago that "you know me -- at least you know about me." Perhaps that was a Freudian slip portraying a wisp of self-pity. I'm definitely not paranoid. After all, my statistics are good. I have been translated into 255 different languages and dialects. Portions of my contents have been translated into 912 different languages and dialects. The part of me you call The New Testament can now be read in 359 different tongues across the earth!

I know myself well enough to be convinced that I am not a back-number. My circulation is still healthy even though I've been around for awhile. And, to tell you the truth, I've got enough Pride to believe that I

am not on trial; my readers are. I have long since proved my worth.

What troubles me, I hope for good reasons, is the suspicion that even though I continue to enjoy "Best Seller" status, I am not as widely read or correctly understood as I deserve to be. I have what you might call a "Relic Complex." People use me in much the way they would a "good luck" charm or a magic stone. I have become a "legend" in your time. But I want to be more than a legend. I want you to know me for the living word that I am.

People, it would seem, will do anything for me except the one thing needful. They will fight for me and defend me. Purchase and display me. Argue over me. Translate and circulate me. Welcome literature about me. The one thing they do not do as they ought is pick me up and read me.

\* \* \*

One reason for this strange state of affairs is that many people think of me as dull. I find that hard to take. Especially when you recall my turbulent history. Talk about being banned in Boston! I've been X-Rated by higher powers than that! Would you believe that kings and popes were once so afraid of me that they forbade my being translated into the language of the common man? Why, right here in your own country there were plantation owners who didn't want their slaves to read the gospel. "Might give them bad ideas," they said.

Who do you think sparked Martin Luther's Reformation? What book do you suppose was read every day on the Mayflower as it pushed its way to America? What book was it that sent Livingston and Schweitzer off to Africa, Morrison to China, Grenfell to Labrador, Zwemer to Arabia? Where do you think Martin Luther King got the stuff of which his dream was fashioned?

Others tend to be cool toward me because they see

me as a self-serving product of the church. They regard me as a dead and dated book that continues to live only because the church keeps me going by featuring me so conspicuously and quoting me so often. Actually, I owe my life to no such thing! In fact, I am more a troubler of the church than an adjunct.

No, what keeps me in demand is my ability to speak to human experience. That's really what I am about. Don't look to me for some abstract theory about life. Some philosophical system that might serve as a key to all the mysteries of existence. I offer neither.

My bag is people. People laughing. People crying. People sinning - and getting up again or staying there. People promising and renegeing. Marrying and giving in marriage. People off on journeys and people with no place to go but home. People praying and people cursing. People falling in and out of love. People lust-ing and hating, and killing - or people provoked by faith to seek a better kingdom.

Think of me as a gallery with paintings everywhere. Adam staring at a piece of fruit. Noah laying the keel of a ship on dry land. Abraham kissing the home folk goodbye and starting off. Samson resting his handsome head on Delilah's lap. Job in a shouting match with God. David quivering for Bathsheba.

Isaiah being over-powered by the smoke of holiness and the sight of angels in the temple. Joseph desperate for a room. Peter warming himself by a fire in the outer court. Paul telling it "like it is" to Agrippa. John squinting at a vision in his exile on Patmos. Jesus looking into the face of His betrayer under a Passover moon. If you stick me I will not run with ink, I will bleed with life!

\* \* \*

But my avowed enemies are not the whole story. My friends have hurt me too. Well-meaning friends who have mis-represented my contents out of misguided zeal. So

convinced were they that my words are the Bread of Life that they began to use me in ways that are foreign to my purpose.

Take science, for example. They have tried to make me a text-book on the subject. As though Moses, to name but one, could have been privvy to 20th Century physics! As though the Psalmist, in his day, could have known that the world was round instead of flat.

Others who love me with an unwise love tout me as a spooky source of knowledge about the future. They are forever finding cryptic significance in all manner of names and numbers. Seven and 666 are two of their favorites. Their happy hunting grounds are the books of Daniel and Revelation. Even Jesus didn't know as much about the end as these Zealots do. Why, they make me look like a substitute for a Ouija board or a deck of taro cards!

Then there are the literalists. To insure me against being lumped together with other books, they stoutly hold that everything within my covers is the literal truth. This does a lot of damage.

As you know, I am not one book but 66. Within my 1,189 chapters there are many different kinds of writing. There are letters, prophecies, stories, parables, maxims, songs, poems, homilies -- and many, many more. Each of these types must be approached on its own terms. One doesn't read a love letter the way she reads a summary of Income Tax Regulations. Besides, we dare not confuse the essential meaning of a statement with the Oriental imagery and form in which it happens to be expressed.

As one of my more perceptive interpreters put it not so long ago, "...naturalists who legitimize the Book of Jonah by telling us which fish are capable of anthropophagy and regurgitation are wasting their learning on misapplied piety." 1 When will those who claim to love me most realize that I can be taken

seriously without being taken literally?

Oh yes, I should mention one more thing here while I have your mind on the subject. Some of my friends prevent my being better known by their habit of spiritualizing everything I say. It's as though I were intended only for the soul.

I am quite aware of my ability to heal your inner hurts. Consolation and hope are among my specialties. Frankly, ministers would be lost without me. I mean -- think of how rough it would be on them if they had to try to comfort people in an experience of grief or loss with only their own words or a few lines from a Hallmark card. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God ..." (Ps. 42:5) There's a prescription for you.

But I don't treat the soul as an entity that stands alone. I'm interested in peace in the world as well as peace in the heart. When I speak of freeing the captives I don't have in mind only spiritual captives - I mean real prisoners in real jails. I have a lot to say about how wealth should be used. How the poor are to be regarded. How the earth is to be cared for. How justice is to be administered.

Why some of my best friends ignore this side of me is more than I can figure. I only know it hurts me - especially with the young who want to see wrongs righted in the world. What a pity that they take me to be a sedative rather than a stimulant. One of them let the cat out of the bag the other day when he said with a sneer, "Grandma reads her Bible now. She's cramming for her finals." That made me wince.

\* \* \*

You're good to let me talk to you like this today. And you can be sure that I appreciate your thoughtfulness in honoring Bible Sunday. Watching these young people get their Bibles a few minutes back made me glow inside. You won't mind if I give them a few hints on

how to use me before I close, will you? I have five suggestions to offer, and I'll do it briefly.

1. Remember that, unlike most other books, my various parts are not arranged in the order in which they were written. Genesis, for example, though it comes first, was not the earliest book written. Many of St. Paul's letters were written before the gospels were. The Gospel of St. Mark is earlier than the other three.

2. Remember when you sit down to read me that it is more likely that I will wind up reading you. That's what I am here for. If you come to me only to have your own views confirmed, I cannot do you much good. I will reinforce you where you are right, but disturb you where you are wrong. In fact, you may well reach a point where you must either give up some sin that I have uncovered or stop reading me altogether.

3. Remember that while every part of me is inspired, every part is not equally inspiring. The Book of Esther for example, doesn't mention my author's name at all. I'd be the first to admit that there are stretches here and there that are almost as dull as some of your television programs! Don't let that get you down. There's always light at the end of the tunnel. Besides, mature Christians have been known to find rich treasure in genealogical tables, lists of kings, specifications for the temple - and the like. So stay with it.

4. Bear in mind that the main actor in the story that I tell is not man but God. Those who do not know me well keep talking about man and his search for God. Frankly, I think most people spend their time trying to run away from God! The 66 books that bear my name tell of God and His search for men and women, boys and girls. It's really a love story. He comes. He speaks. He gives his life - for you. My foremost purpose is to tell what God is like, what He has done for the world, and what he expects of those who respond to His love with an answering love of their own.



5. Finally, read me for yourself. You don't need a degree in theology to understand me. Just a ready and willing heart. Start with something like St. Mark's Gospel. And never mind anything as mechanical as a chapter a day. Those chapter divisions are man-made anyway. Take a book at a time. Don't play hop-scotch with me. If you do I'll know that you're not serious.

From the book you choose, read a few verses at a time. Read until some word speaks to you. Then meditate upon that thought. Invite it into your life. Thank God for it. Determine to share it with someone else. Memorize the verse that spoke to you so clearly.

\* \* \*

I am your Bible. My purpose is to point beyond myself to Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. There are more than a quarter of a million words in the English language. I use but 16,000. These are more than enough, however, to put you in touch and keep you in touch with God.

Read me and take me to your hearts, for

My counsel is more dependable  
than that of sorcerers and astrologers.  
My comfort more deep-reaching  
than that of your nearest kin;  
My relevance more timely than  
this morning's newspaper;  
My perspective more reliable than  
any other viewpoint known on earth.

Multitudes have turned to me and not been disappointed. I will not fail you. Try me and see.

To the young I am a star by which  
to steer.  
To the middle-aged a steady beat  
by which to march.  
To those in the sunset years  
a fountain of unfailing hope  
and strength.

## CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord, bless to our minds and hearts the  
word of life.  
Help us to find within its pages  
what we are to believe concerning Thee  
and what duties are required of us,  
Let the grace which provided the book  
to begin with  
enable us to profit from it now  
as we read  
and mark  
and inwardly digest it  
to Thy praise.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

### FOOTNOTE

1. Perry, Michael C., "Believing and Commending the Miracles," THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, p. 340, August 1962



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