

Why I Preach That the Bible Is Literally True. By W. A. Criswell. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969. 160 pp. \$3.50. Reviewed by T. Scott Christmas.

The author, Dr. W. A. Criswell, served as the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. In this very moving book, Criswell sets forth his case for why he preaches that the Bible is literally true. The invitation to write the book was accepted by the author with the “hope that it might encourage other ministers to preach the Bible as the literal, inspired, God-breathed truth of heaven” (p. 7). Criswell is very forthright in asserting that his work is not a documented textbook on biblical theology, but his testimony. He argues that no need exists for another textbook on the inspiration of the Bible, for a library of volumes can be found on the subject. Instead, the writer pours out his heart, “how he feels about God’s Word,” and how his ministry has been affected by the preaching of the Bible.

The work is divided into three sections. In Part 1, Criswell supports *why* he believes that the Bible is literally true. In 10 chapters, the writer puts forth his persuasive case, arguing from points such as the quickening power of the Word, the infallible authority of Christ, the internal witness of the Holy Scriptures, the literal fulfillment of prophecy, and the confirmation of archaeology. The testimony is strong and cogent. It is obvious that Criswell believes in the importance of the study of the Scriptures. He writes:

Everywhere men of letters, eminent statesman, and men of science have testified to the value and inestimable importance of God’s Holy Word. Benjamin Franklin, said “Young man, my advice to you is that you cultivate an acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures.” Thomas Jefferson said, “I have said and always will say that the studious perusal of the sacred volume will make better citizens, better fathers, and better husbands.” Daniel Webster one time said, “From the time that at my mother’s knee I learned to lisp the

sacred writings they have been my daily study.” Truly, God’s book is God’s quickening power, to the saving of the soul, and to the regeneration of the human race (p. 18).

In Part 2, the writer boldly declares *what* he preaches, believing that the Bible is literally true. Chapters 11-17 reveal methods rejected by many in the church and scholarly community of Criswell’s day. He spent 17 years and eight months preaching from Genesis to Revelation. Not only did his efforts result in people increasingly bringing their Bibles to worship services, but the spiritual lives of both pastor and people were greatly deepened.

Criswell repeatedly argued for the message of the literal truth of the Bible. “God’s message in the Bible is plain, simple, full, comprehensive, and all-sufficient. What we need for faith, salvation, and practice, we find in the Bible. We need nothing else. What the Scriptures say God’s says. What God says is literally true and is to be received by us as truth itself” (p. 88). Criswell preached that the literal promises of the Bible were to be literally fulfilled, people were literally lost without Christ, and that the truth of the Bible is everlastingly narrow.

This bold pastor argued for the fact of Genesis when many believed the book to be fable. He preached a mighty God instead of atheistic evolution. Criswell writes:

The assumption of the spontaneous development of nothing into something and the development of that inert something into the personality of a man is about as reasonable as if an explosion in a printing plant resulted in the twenty-four volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* or as likely as if one should throw alphabets into the air and keep throwing them up until they came down in the form of an Aristotelian treatise on drama (p. 104).

The preacher proclaimed Jesus Christ to be the God-Man. Arguing for the fact of Jesus’ existence, His literal atonement for sin, and the literal, physical resurrection of Christ, Criswell

perpetually presented Jesus Christ as the ever-present, living Lord. The people of First Baptist Dallas were frequently reminded that this same Jesus was coming again! All of this was done at a time when a literal approach to preaching the Bible was not *en vogue*.

In Part 3, a passionate appeal is made to other preachers to preach that the Bible is literally true. In the remaining four chapters, the author trumpets the need to stand on the authority of the Word of God. Criswell argues against an infallible church but for an infallible Bible. He describes the Word of God as immutable or unchanging. The author traces the practice of literal interpretation back to Ezra the Scribe, following the return of Israel from the Babylonian Exile (p. 139). After chronicling the historical departure from a literal interpretation, Criswell asserts that the Great Reformation “was activated by a return to the literal method of the preaching of the Scriptures” (p. 141). He quotes Martin Luther as having said, “Every word should be allowed to stand in its natural meaning and should not be abandoned unless faith forces us to it. The literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and of Christian theology” (p. 141). The author goes on to quote John Calvin as having said, “Let us know that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning. Let us embrace and abide it resolutely. It is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say” (p. 141). Criswell concludes by boldly proclaiming, “Let God speak and let all men hear what God has to say” (p. 145).

After exposing the emptiness of modern liberal theology, Criswell implores his readers to be like the faithful Christian witnesses of centuries past. “There is no common ground between infidelity and Christianity” (p. 159). He closes by exhorting his fellow preachers to “stand by the

Book, preach its treasures, love its words, serve its Savior, and humbly seek to obey his mandates” (p. 160).

This reviewer gained tremendous respect for Dr. Criswell through the reading of this work. He repeatedly displayed a broad knowledge of history and classical literature by quoting freely from men such as Plato, Milton, Philo, Origin, Chrysostom, Voltaire, and Spurgeon. His extensive command of the English language and broad circle of study impressed upon this reviewer Criswell’s high scholarly caliber. And yet, in spite his great academia, an inexhaustible supply of passion fuels the communication of these lofty facts.

Throughout the work are many references to the perpetual attacks on Scripture through the higher critical method (pp. 22, 23, 38, 39). Yet, Criswell exhibits indefatigable opposition to the destructive nature of these efforts. Further, he seems to do so at a time when his theological position was becoming increasingly unpopular.

Dr. Criswell summarized his case by writing, “The edifice of my theology is built upon the following epistemological foundation: that the Scriptures are the teachings of the divinely authenticated messengers of Jesus Christ. All of its doctrines arise from God’s self-disclosure to humanity” (pp. 135-136). He believed the Bible to be the final and ultimate authority for all of life. And he desired to persuade others to earnestly cling to that same position. Near the conclusion of the book, the author gives persuasive testimony to the authoritative certainty of the Bible. Criswell writes:

We need never equivocate or be apologetic when we stand up to preach the message of Christ on the authority of the Word of God. The very tone of the Bible is authoritative. It might be supposed that a book dealing with spiritual truths, all of which lie beyond the purview of the physical senses, would speak with some measure of reserve or uncertainty. But it is the opposite in the Bible. There is not an “if,” a “maybe,” or a “hope so” in the Bible. A divine book, heavenly inspired, could not speak that way concerning truth and salvation, and if it did speak that way it would have no message for us. We want no guesses about life and death, heaven and hell. We must know and must know certainly. We want authority, and there can be no final authority with respect to these questions unless we find it in a divine revelation. Therefore, the Book of God, being God’s Word, always says “Yea,” “Amen,” “Thus saith the Lord,” and “Verily verily, I say unto you.” If we put an “if” into the Decalogue you lay a charge of dynamite under the morality of men and nations. If you put in “if” before the story of the manger of Bethlehem you destroy the Incarnation in human flesh by a preexistent Christ. If you put an “if” by the side of the cross of Calvary you cast doubt upon the hope of the forgiveness of our sins. If you put in “if” by the side of the story of the empty tomb in Joseph’s garden, our visions of life and immortality vanish into thin air. But blessed be God, there are no “if’s” in the Bible. It gives no uncertain sound. The trumpet call is clear and plain. The Bible speaks as the oracle of God (pp. 137-138).

Judging by the general approach of many pastors within the Southern Baptist Convention to preach the Bible as literally true, it seems as though Criswell’s testimony and example has had quite a positive effect. Although this reviewer had already embraced that same belief prior to reading Criswell’s book, this heart-moving work strengthened that prior conviction. The book was inspirational, often difficult to put down. It is one that this reviewer will joyfully read again and heartily recommend to other men entrusted with the sacred responsibility of faithfully preaching God’s Word.