

Bible: Cookbook or Casebook? By Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. x7090524
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 and John 17:6-19
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Did you hear how the disciples chose a leader for the early church to take the place of Judas? They “cast lots”, which is like throwing dice. I don’t know how you feel about that process. We might save a lot of campaign finance money in our nation if we used that method to choose our presidents.

Just because something is in the Bible does not mean we should proceed in the same way! If you think we should follow the examples of Biblical characters, consider these. Jacob was a liar, a cheat, and an opportunist. David committed adultery and white collar murder because he fell in love with his neighbor’s wife, Bathsheba. Jonah ran away from his duty and tried to keep God’s good news to himself. Peter was a windbag who didn’t follow through. Paul was arrogant. Mary, Martha’s sister, along with the rest of the disciples, was unhelpful with household chores.

We must be careful even in following Jesus’ example. This calls into question the wearing of a “WWJD” bracelet. (That stands for, “What Would Jesus Do?”) He withered a fig tree out of impatience. He treated his family members unkindly. He was rude to his mother at a wedding feast.

The Bible is a casebook, not a cookbook. A cookbook contains recipes. If you follow its instructions, you will end up with something good to eat. If we follow the instructions of the Bible, beginning with the Old Testament, we would have an altar that looks like this. It would be made of acacia wood, two and one-half cubits wide, a cubit and one-half broad, and a cubit and one-half high. (A cubit is the length from the elbow to the tip of the outstretched middle finger.) It would be overlaid with pure gold, and would have four golden rings on its corners, rings on its sides, and two cherubim of hammered gold on its ends.

The minister would wear a finely-wrought garment made of blue, purple, and scarlet stuff.¹ She or he would have a golden ephod (apron) of gold, blue, purple and crimson. It would be made of gold leaf, hammered out and cut into threads. The minister would wear a breastpiece of gold, with four rows of stones of carnelian, chrysolite, emerald, turquoise, sapphire, moonstone, jacinth, agate, amethyst, beryl, onyx, and jasper.

If we used the New Testament as a cookbook, we would speak in tongues, confusing all who heard.

Some believe that if they have a problem, they should take the Bible, let it fall open, and the answer will be found there on that page. Think of a young man, depressed because his girlfriend was going to the prom with his best friend. He lets the Bible fall open, and it opens to the first Chapter of Second Samuel: “By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa; and there was Saul leaning on his spear. When he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. I answered, ‘Here sir.’

... And he said to me, ‘Come, stand over me and kill me; for convulsions have seized me, and yet my life still lingers.’ So, I stood over him and killed him.”² The Bible as cookbook would dictate that a depressed person ask the closest person to kill him. If we used the Bible as a cookbook, our faith wouldn’t taste good.

¹Exodus 28

²2 Samuel 1:6-10

If we follow the Bible as cookbook, we will become frustrated and turned off from the Bible. It contains many stories of wars, killing, and rape. These are not ways Christians are supposed to act, nor, are they the ways in which God acts today.

The Bible is a casebook that describes human actions in relationship to God. By reading the Bible, we discover what can happen when people act in various ways. It is a mirror of humanity: of ourselves. No one in the Bible is perfect. The stories of Peter, Mary, and even Judas, are our stories. They are reflections of human ways and actions.

Understanding the Bible as casebook means we can see the development of faith in God as humanity develops. The faith of Abraham was not far removed from paganism. He was about to sacrifice his son to please a whimsical God. Moses believed in a God who frees, protects, and fights for, a chosen people. Jeremiah believed that people should have moral responsibility. Jesus taught about a loving God who wills that all people accept that love.

By studying the Bible as casebook and being open to God's Spirit, we can mature in faith and grow closer to God. We can learn from the mistakes of others and from our mistakes, how to be better Christians.

What was the job description for those first disciples, according to Luke, the author of Acts? Simply, it was to be witnesses to the resurrection. On that Easter, Jesus had overcome death. Jesus lives on in the church— in his followers. He lives on in you!

We live in scary times. All I need to do to scare you is to mention a few words: Stock market, AIG (American International Group), Afghanistan, Iraq, IED (Improvised Explosive Device), and Internet porn. In these scary times, we are called to be witnesses to the risen Christ.

Those first Christians lived in scary times. Those footsteps you hear echoing behind you: are they the footsteps of a Roman soldier or a temple guard coming to arrest you as one of Jesus' followers? Though the times were scary, those disciples proclaimed Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Our job is be witnesses to the new life offered to us by Christ. In what ways has your life changed or become new because of your Christian faith? Others need to hear the good news of new life. They don't need to be weighed down by guilt, the way Judas was. They don't need to be condemned by personality, loneliness, or illness.

We will proclaim new life in the face of financial fears. We will proclaim peace in the face of pious persecutions. Just as a green shoot can spout from the stump of a tree, new life can come out of anyone.

God will keep you safe in your task as a witness. John reports Jesus' prayer for followers: "Protect them in your name."³

The Bible as casebook tells the stories of lives transformed by God: Saul becomes Paul; a prostitute turns into a devoted servant of God; slaves are freed; laborers become healers and teachers; the weak are empowered.

The Bible doesn't prescribe how to act. It tells us be close to God, and God's spirit will fill and transform us into closer perfection as God's children.

³John 17:11