

The Biblical Church

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Acts: The Irresistible Church Series

Acts 6:11 – 7:60

Virtually every weird new philosophy, every single cult, every eccentric crank, and every extreme political perspective claims support for their views with the Bible.

The Bible is wrong interpreted in every age by non-Christians and Christians

Back in the 1970's there was a best-selling book titled "Chariots of the Gods" by Erich Von Daniken. He claimed that the earth was originally populated by aliens from space and the Bible supported his theory. Where did he go in the Bible to support the idea that invaders from space populated the earth? Von Daniken argued that the Ark of the Covenant was actually a radio transmitter linking Moses with a space ship. And the space ship, of course, was one of the Chariots of the Gods. And then he backed his claim up with this supporting evidence.

"Without actually consulting Exodus, I seem to remember that the Ark was often surrounded by flashing sparks..."

He goes on to argue that flashing sparks proved that the Ark of the Covenant was used as a radio transmitter. Now, he didn't actually consult the Book of Exodus. And you know why? Nowhere in the Book of Exodus does it say that the Ark was surrounded by flashing sparks. The Ark was surrounded by the glory of God.

There was a similar book written by Irwin Ginsburg, who argued back in 1975 that the Garden of Eden was actually a space ship that crash-landed on the earth carrying two superior space people – Adam and Eve. And these two space people populated the earth.

By the way, Von Daniken's book was purchased by millions of people.

Some times a misinterpretation of a word in the English Bible becomes the basis for a whole new religion. Listen to these quotes:

Divide the name Adam into two syllables and it reads A dam, or obstruction. This suggests the thought of something fluid, of mortal mind in solution. It further suggests the thought of that "darkness...upon the face of the deep," when matter or dust was deemed the agent of Deity in

creating man, - when matter, as that which is accursed, stood opposed to Spirit. Here A dam is not a mere play upon words; it stands for obstruction, error, even the separation of man from God.

This writer turns to a Hebrew word “Adam” or “Adamah” which means the earth or the ground and develops a doctrine based on the English pun. Adam = a dam. This is such a ridiculous misreading and misinterpretation of the Bible that I wouldn’t even quote it except that it became the foundation of a major new religion called Christian Science founded by Mary Baker Eddy.

Sometimes the Bible is misinterpreted by simply misquoting the Bible, or ignoring the context of a Bible quotation. Again, back in the 1970’s there was an Indian guru named Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who said:

Christ said, “Be still and know that I am God.” What he meant was be still and know that you are our God and when you know that you are God you will begin to live godhood, and living godhood there is no reason to suffer.

Now, there are problems with this. First of all, Christ didn’t say, “be still and know that I am God.” The quote comes from Psalm 46.10-11:

Psalms 46:10-11

10 Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” 11The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

The point of the quote is to distinguish between God and Israel – not to say that we are all God.

But in case any of you, who are Christians, are feeling smug; maybe you can’t believe how the Bible has been misinterpreted by different religions and different philosophies, twisting the scripture out of shape to make it say what it never was intended to say. Sadly, Christians are also guilty of misusing and mishandling the Bible.

Back in the 1970’s (again, that decade in particular seemed to spawn all of this weird use of scripture), Hal Lindsay wrote what was then the best-selling Christian book of all time, titled *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

It was only recently passed by Rick Warren’s massively popular, *The Purpose Driven Life*. What Hal Lindsay did was to essentially turn the Book of Revelation into a Rorschach Inkblot so that we could simply read the Book of Revelation to fit any contemporary event that we wanted. What Lindsey finds in the book of Revelation are references to supersonic jet aircraft with missiles, advanced attack helicopters, battle tanks, ICBMs with multiple targeted re-entry vehicles, biological and chemical weapons, aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, space

station satellites. In Lindsey's inspired Bible code, Revelation's locusts become helicopters. The crowns of gold are the helmets worn by pilots. The sound of their wings are the thunderous sound of many attack helicopters flying overhead. The bow wielded by the anti-Christ is a code word for long-range weapons like Intercontinental ballistic missiles(ICBM) and the reference to the color of fire in Revelation 9:17 becomes the Chinese national flag emblazoned on military vehicles.

What is really disconcerting is that Lindsey changes interpretations of the same Bible passages as the geo-political contemporary scene changes.

As Russia fell as a world power, Lindsey's writing focused more and more on fundamentalist Islam. So in 1970 when Lindsey wrote *The Late Great Planet Earth* he said:

The Russian force will establish command headquarters on Mt. Moriah, or the temple area in Jerusalem.

In *The Apocalypse Code*, written in 1997, as the greatest threat to Israel, Lindsey writes:

The Russian-Muslim force will set up command headquarters on the temple mount in Jerusalem.

Again, back in 1981, Lindsey wrote:

As the biblical prophets predicted long ago, the Russians are the greatest threat to world peace.

But in 1994 in his book titled *Planet Earth 2000 AD*, Lindsey writes:

The greatest threat to world peace is fundamentalist Islam, just like the scriptures warned.

I could run through the arguments of the misuse of scripture by Christians in the Southern part of the United States before the Civil War to support slavery based on a curse, supposedly, that was on the entire African people.

I've been doing a series from the Book of Acts, a series that I've titled *The Irresistible Church*. What I've been talking about throughout this series is what it takes to make the church today in the 21st century attractive to those outside of church. What makes the church compelling, worth taking another look at? Today as we continue in this series, I've titled my message, "The Biblical Church." Let's pray.

Acts 6:11- 7:1

11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” 12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” 15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. 1 Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”

There is an argument between Christian Jews like Stephen, and non-Christian Jews like the Jewish High Priests and the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin about the proper interpretation of the Hebrew Bible that we call the Old Testament. Now, the argument regarding the proper interpretation of the Bible, particularly the proper use and interpretation of the Old Testament is not simply an ancient argument. This argument continues today especially within modern Judaism. There are about 250,000 Jewish people who are Jews like me, who believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Jewish Messiah sent by God into the world to save us from our sin.

I once got into a debate with my ultra-orthodox Jewish stepbrother; we were arguing about the proper interpretation of different passages from the Old Testament. I said, “Michael, listen. There is no one alive today who simply reads the Old Testament straight on and without a lens. You read the Old Testament through the interpretation of the oral tradition of the rabbis that got written down in a series of books called the Talmud. I read the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus and the New Testament writers. The question really is which is more consistent with the message of the Old Testament – what the rabbis later on said the Old Testament meant, or what Jesus and his followers said the Old Testament meant?”

Now, many Bible scholars have said that Stephen’s speech that is recorded here in Acts 7 is the most important speech that we have in the Book of Acts because it gives us keys to interpreting the Bible correctly. How are we preserved from believing that the Ark of the Covenant was a radio transmitter to a space ship, or that the name Adam which is a Hebrew name could really be broken up into two words, A-dam. We are not reading contemporary events and weaponry back into the Book of Revelation. His speech gives us some keys for properly reading the Bible. And what are some of those keys?

First of all, we have a warning from Stephen that:

The Bible is wrongly interpreted when God is reduced to a particular place, or nation, or thing

Over and over again in this speech Stephen makes the point that you cannot tie God down to a particular place, or nation, or thing. The God of the Bible is a transcendent God. That means he is separate from all of his creation. He existed before creation; and, he is not contained in time and space. You can't tie God down. You can't reduce him down to a place, or a nation, or a thing. Look at this with me in Acts 7: 1 - 5

Acts 7:1 - 5

1 Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" 2 To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 3 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' 4 So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child...

God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia; God spoke to Abraham in Harran. God gave Abraham not a foot of ground that was his own in the Promised Land.

We read this about Joseph in Acts 7 verses 9-10:

Acts 7:9-10

9 Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

God blessed Joseph in Egypt, not in the Promised Land. And then we read regarding the Patriarchs in Acts 7:16

Acts 7:16

Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

The only thing the Patriarchs ever got by way of land was a tomb at a place called Shechem. This reference must have been particularly galling to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, because Shechem was in Samaria, the home of those unclean, religiously unorthodox Samaritans. So God is not restricted to a place. Stephen keeps underlining that. We read in Acts 7: 33-34 regarding Moses:

Acts 7:30 - 34

30 After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 32 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. 33 Then the Lord said to him, Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

Here we have holy ground outside of the Holy Land. Mt. Sinai is in Arabia, not Israel.

Finally, Stephen sums up his speech in Acts 7: 48 - 50

Acts 7: 48 - 50

48 However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: 49 Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?

God is not confined to manmade things. The biggest temptations we humans who twist and misinterpret scripture are to try to use the Bible and use God to serve our manmade human-hands made agendas, our manmade causes. This is the great temptation that we human beings face all the time - to try to tie God to our all-too-human agendas and national causes and philosophies.

The Emperor Constantine, back in the 4th century, faced a challenge to his reign as Emperor. He had a vision of a cross in the sky. Constantine claimed that God said to him, "If you paint crosses on the Roman shields, you will have a military victory." And so Constantine had all of his troops paint a cross on their shields. They went out to battle and won. The Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and he erected the Arch of Constantine in Rome to celebrate that victory.

Jesus Christ supports our national agenda. Jesus Christ supports our side of the war.

One Spanish soldier in conquering Mexico declared: "This is for glory, for God and for gold." We came here to serve God and to get rich. God is on our side in this military conquest.

There is an English hymn titled *Jerusalem*. It goes this way:

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountain green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

It closes with these words:

*I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*

Jerusalem is considered England's most popular patriotic song and many feel that it ought to be used as the English National Anthem instead of God Save the Queen. Did those feet in ancient times walk upon England's mountain green? The answer is "no." Jesus never was in England. But the English tried to tie him to their nation's agenda.

One of the most tragic attempts to reduce the God of the Bible to a nation's agenda, to their manmade philosophy, was the misuse of God and the Bible by the Dutch Afrikaners in support of this system of apartheid which simply is the Afrikaner word for "apartness" that the different races in South Africa were ordained by God to develop separately with all of the laws that prohibited intermarriage and separated occupations for whites and blacks and separated living areas for whites and blacks and education for whites and blacks. All of that was justified by misusing scripture and reducing God down to a perverted manmade philosophy.

There was a controversy just a few months ago when New Testament references to Jesus Christ were inscribed on the gun sights of the assault rifles used by the US Marines and Army in Afghanistan and Iraq. A Michigan company was inscribing the gun sights with verses from the New Testament.

Jesus Christ is not tied just to the Romans, the Spanish, and the English, but now he is tied to America and reduced down to our particular national agendas.

I recently had an experience at a government building in the city. I had to do some business at a particular government building. There were folks outside signing people up for a particular political cause. I was on my way into the building when a very aggressive person came over to me and said, "Will you sign this petition?" I said, "No, actually, I'm on the other side of this issue." The person very smugly said, "Then I will pray for you." I was so offended. I said, "Well, I guess I better pray for you." I went into the government building seething. I thought, "How arrogant." Because I wouldn't join her particular political cause, I was obviously opposing God and she needed to pray for me.

Her assumption, of course, was that there was no way I could be a Christian and not join her cause.

We always need to be careful to exercise proper humility, and appropriate modesty that refuses to tie Almighty God down to our particular nation, our particular land, our particular cause.

Abraham Lincoln had it exactly right when he refused to listen to pastors who would come into his office during the Civil War and tell Lincoln that God was on his side and the side of the North in the Civil War. God was on his side, they said. And President Lincoln, knowing more of the Bible than these pastors did, refused to allow himself to believe that transcendent Almighty God was on his side. Here is what Lincoln said in his 2nd Inaugural Address:

Both [sides in this Civil War] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any man should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes.

Lincoln understood that even though the cause of the Civil War was just – it had to do with abolishing slavery – this did not mean that God was suddenly on the side of the North, or that the North was somehow guiltless or absolutely righteous. God's purposes, Lincoln said, went beyond the purposes of either the South or the North. God can't be reduced to a place, a nation, or a thing.

Here is another principle of Bible interpretation. By the way, if you are interested in this whole subject of how to interpret the Bible correctly, we have a couple of books at our bookstore that I would highly recommend to you. One is titled *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart.

But as we are talking about interpreting the Bible, the Bible is wrongly interpreted when we do not see our own sin and limitations.

The Bible is wrongly interpreted when we do not see our own sin and limitations

The Israelites constantly rejected God and God's representatives. And of course, the Israelites are just like us. That's what we should always say when we read the Old Testament. The Israelites are just like us. They are Exhibit A of the way that we human beings resist God and resist God's Word to us. In the course of his sermon, Stephen repeatedly points out that the rejection of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah was of one piece, consistent with the Israelites rejection of all of God's messengers.

So Joseph's brothers hated him even though he was God's appointed deliverer for them.

Acts 7:9

Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him

Moses was another divinely appointed representative, who was repeatedly rejected by the Israelites.

Acts 7:25 - 27

25 Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. 26 The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?' 27 But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?'

And then Stephen talks about the Israelites' constant idolatry in the wilderness. The speech almost becomes boring in recounting the repetitiveness of the people's sin. We want to scream, "I get it!" But that is the nature of our sin. There is this boring repetitiveness. It is always the same thing. When it comes to Christian leaders it is always money, sex and power – always. As the founder of the Vineyard movement, John Wimber, told me many years ago, "Rich, with Christian leaders it is always gold, glitter, or gals." This boring repetition of resistance and rebellion and rejection of God. Instead of saying, "Yes, I surrender to God's way," we say no, I insist on my own way.

So Stephen finishes up his charge in Acts 7:51 when he says:

Acts 7:51

You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

What terrible charges to be stiff-necked. The picture of being stiff-necked is taken from farming where animals wore yokes on their necks in order to pull a plow. Some animals would stiffen their necks and refuse to accept the yoke. For the Israelites being stiff-necked meant that they refused to submit to and surrender to God and to the covenant that God gave them.

Friend, can you look at your life and say: Here is a major area of my life that I am stiffening my neck and refusing to surrender to God's yoke? God may be trying to speak to you regarding your purchasing habits, running up debt. And yet you refuse to surrender your shopping to God. God may be speaking to you about a relationship that is unhealthy and out of bounds for you. But you say, "no, I'm keeping this relationship." God has been speaking to you about your

attitude towards your husband or wife, the unforgiveness, the bitterness, the holding of a grudge.

Is there any place where you have stiffened your neck?

And then Stephen accuses the people of being uncircumcised in heart. What does it mean to be uncircumcised in heart?

Well, circumcision, of course, was the sign given by God to the Jewish people that distinguished them from the nations. Circumcision was the physical sign causing Israelite men to look different than the rest of the Gentile world. To be uncircumcised means that you are no different than the rest of the world. The uncircumcised at heart means that in your actions and your attitudes you are just like everyone else. There is nothing different about you.

God has always wanted a people who would stand out, who would be different, and who would shine as a light in a dark world.

When we refuse to obey God, when we choose to resist God no matter what we're doing religiously, we look like everyone else.

Now, this is the state of fallen humanity – stiff-necked and uncircumcised at heart, following a repetitive pattern of sin. And any religious teaching that suggests that you or I could somehow be freed from the taint of sin altogether misinterprets the Bible.

Our need to become more and more whole. But what the Bible calls the process of sanctification, is never completed in this life. Solomon prayed this way in 1 Kings 8:46:

1 Kings 8:46

“When they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—

And the author of Proverbs asked this rhetorical question in Proverbs 20:9:

Proverbs 20:9

Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin”?

That is why Jesus commands us to pray every day.

Matthew 6:11-12

11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

We can come to a place of not having sin reign over us or dominate us. The fact that we are all sinners doesn't mean that we just give up, or sink to our lowest

level. But it does mean that we approach life with modesty and humility recognizing that each of us has massive blind spots. Our sinfulness means we need each other. We need one another's correction and counsel. Our hearts can be led astray. No one sees the whole truth other than God.

This doctrine of our perpetual sinfulness is the reason, by the way, that you absolutely have to reject any philosophy that sounds like: "If it feels good, do it." Your impulses, my impulses, may turn out to be unbelievably destructive not only to ourselves where we can blow up our own lives, but destructive to our families, destructive to our church, destructive to the cause of Christ.

Jesus taught us, by way of contrast, not to surrender to all of our impulses. According to Jesus, to live a good life we often have to deny our impulses. We have to crucify them and put them to death.

Well, here is the last thing. I've talked about wrong ways to interpret the Bible. Reducing God down to our nation, our land, our humanly created things, failing to take account of our sin and fallibility.

The Bible is rightly interpreted when we read it as a pointer to Christ

The Bible must to be read as a Christ-centered book. Everything in the bible is a sign-post designed to point us to Jesus Christ. That's what Jesus told his disciples after his resurrection on the road to Emmaus. We read these words:

Luke 24:27

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

All the scriptures are meant to point to Christ. This is what Stephen's ultimate point was in his battle with the Jewish High Priests and the Jewish ruling council. He said, "Guys, you misread the scripture because the entire scripture only gets unlocked for us when we read it in terms of Jesus the Messiah." You have thrown away the key.

So, for example, the story of Joseph, Acts 7:9-10:

Acts 7:9-10

9 Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

In Joseph, we see Jesus as preserver, as provider, as savior. Joseph is the one who is beloved by his father, just like Jesus was beloved by his Father. Joseph was sold by his brothers at the price of a slave. Jesus was sold for 30 pieces of

silver, the price of a slave. Joseph was found taking upon himself the form of a servant. Jesus took on himself the form of a servant. Joseph was victorious in resisting temptation. Jesus was victorious in resisting Satan and all the temptation Satan faced. Joseph was unjustly condemned and bound. Jesus was unjustly condemned. Joseph was exalted to the position of prince and savior as was Jesus. And Joseph showed himself to his brothers only on the second visit. That's what Stephen says Acts 7:13:

Acts 7:13

On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family.

And that's what Jesus is going to do with the Jewish people. Only on his second visit will he show himself plainly, not in a hidden way, but plainly as Lord and Christ.

Moses was delivered from a violent death from the hands of an evil king in infancy. Jesus was delivered from a violent death at the hands of another evil King, Herod. Moses was meant to be a pointer to Jesus. He delivered the people from their prolonged bondage in Egypt. And Jesus delivers us from bondage way more oppressive than Egypt's bondage. Jesus delivers us from the bondage of sin. Moses tried to reconcile people and was rejected. And so Jesus tries to reconcile us and is rejected. Moses worked signs and wonders; Jesus works signs and wonders.

The Bible is properly read only when we read it continually in light of Jesus Christ. Christ unlocks the book. The whole Bible is meant to point us to Jesus, to continually ask: Where is Jesus? Where is Jesus in this passage? Where is Jesus in this teaching? Where is Jesus in all that you are saying?

And you know, not only is the Bible supposed to be a pointer to Christ, our own lives are supposed to be sign posts pointing to Christ. Here is how the passage ends in Acts 7 54 - 60:

Acts 7:54-60

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen confessed Christ before men and as he died, Christ confessed Stephen before God. They drag him out of the city and kill him just as Christ was crucified outside of the city. We read Stephen's last words. He said first: "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." He gave his spirit to Christ. The prayer is almost identical to the dying words of Stephen's Lord and Savior when Christ died on the cross. He said the same thing. Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.

The last thing Stephen said was when he fell on his knees. He cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And this is so reminiscent of Jesus when he hung on a cross and said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." Stephen's life was lived in imitation of his master. He knew what he was called to be. He was called to be a sign post to Christ.

A biblical church is not only a church in which the text of the Bible is correctly taught or rightly interpreted. A biblical church is a church in which the text of the Bible is actually written on the hearts of the people. We become a biblical church, an irresistible church, when we look like the Star of the Bible – Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

The Biblical Church

Rich Nathan

August 15, 2010

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Acts 6:11 – 7:60

- I. The Bible is wrongly interpreted in every age by non-Christians and Christians

- II. The Bible is wrongly interpreted when God is reduced to a particular place or nation or thing

- III. The Bible is wrongly interpreted when we do not see our sin and limitations

- IV. The Bible is rightly interpreted when we read it as a pointer to Christ