

WESTGATE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Eric Greer

How to Read the Good Book Well

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Introduction

“It is always possible to argue against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek for an agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our reach.” (Paul Ricoeur, Theologian and Philosopher 1913-2005)

This book is written specifically to and for the adult Bible classes at the Westgate Church of Christ. I read and reviewed several books and articles in preparation and for those interested in additional research I have included a complete bibliography and appendices of major documents relevant to the class.

Also included is a glossary of terms that are found printed in **bold type**. These words and names may be less familiar to some so I provide more details about them for clarification. These **bold words** could also be a subject of further investigation for the reader.

Another feature of this book is the inclusion of questions relevant to each chapter for further discussion at the end of each class presentation. I believe the class member will have a better experience if he/she reads the brief chapter for each week of study and takes some time to review those questions in advance to discuss in class.

The book moves from a discussion of what I believe to be important first principles about how one might approach the study of biblical interpretation, through a brief history of the **Stone-Campbell Movement** approach to interpretation and then, concludes with my thoughts on how one might approach the Scriptures for understanding.

I believe you will recognize that I appreciate that others may hold to different methods of interpretation. I respect the diligent efforts of many Christian thinkers who may come to different conclusions than my own. However, I also believe that it is important that each of us carefully consider how we might best handle God's word and divide it rightly (2 Timothy 2:15).

Simply accepting the interpretations of others without applying critical thought on our own part seems to demonstrate a lack of respect for the One who we all seek to know so intimately. I encourage you to read and study these pages with that attitude and welcome the discussion that will follow as we all seek to grow closer to God.



Created for Relationship

“Our finitude entails that we only see things in part – we never see the whole. We certainly do not see the world with God’s eyes or understanding. Our finite brains cannot contain the infinite depth of divine knowledge” (John Mark Hicks)

The answer to every Bible question is simple – GOD. In Himself, God is relationship – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In making us *Imago Dei* (the image of God) we too were made for relationship. An important aspect of the relationship of the first humans, Adam and Eve, to God was that it was unbroken. They “were two open people, the man and woman, without shame” (Genesis 2:25).⁸ In this way – open and without shame – and in other ways the man and woman were like God. But, let’s focus on this particular way for now.

This original arrangement of unbroken relationship had certain boundaries. The role of humanity was: 1) to depend on the Creator, 2) to yield to the Creator’s control over the world, 3) to experience life, and 4) to obey the rules made by the Creator. In the Fall, humanity reversed this order so that we: 1) depend on ourselves, 2) control our world, 3) judge ourselves and each other so that we cease to be able to experience ourselves and each other, and 4) live any way we want.²

Designed as dependent, we were already hardwired for the process of interpretation. Communion with God and one another assumes communication. Thus, interpretation is embedded in our original design. By design humanity is meant for interpretation. It is through our inter-relationship with one another and our Creator that we grow. Our individual experiences shared in community help us to discern our world because we only see in part.

Our brokenness complicates things. Not only do we see in part but our vision is now distorted by sin. It is imperative that we first return to partnership with our Creator through Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Spirit. “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you and call attention to all things which I said to you” (John 14:26).

We are not what we will be when God's order has been fully restored in our lives. To see things in part does not entail that we don't see something real but that what we see is not the whole story and that what we see is funneled through our interpretative faculties. Seeing only a part distorts our ability to interpret events and people.

Not Every Interpretation Is a Good One

It is important to recognize the truth that we all "see in part" and that our diversity of experiences is shaped by our: culture, **mores**, pain, vantage point, education, and many other factors.



Discerning between good and bad interpretations.

The first discerning line is **empirical** reality itself. There is certain givenness to the world. For example, I have a Bible that belonged to my grandma. While the meaningfulness and significance of this Bible is relative to each interpreter, the reality that I have this Bible is something that norms every interpretation of that particular Bible. Any interpretation that would deny I have this Bible is false, but almost everyone would have a different interpretation of my grandma's Bible relative their own situation, needs, and perceptions (not my favorite version, too worn, too big, small print, sentimental memories, etc...) There is no normative interpretation (a single universal truth about my grandma's Bible), but there are interpretive norms about that Bible (it exists).

Second, we must have a **hermeneutic** of love. Interpretation in God's economy is first about love. According to John's gospel Jesus is, "completely grace and truth" (1:14). Fulfilling the great commands to love God and others means that we resist manipulation, power and greed as we engage others (or a text) through interpretation. To hold different understandings is no threat if we demonstrate love for God and others within the bounds of our **empirical** reality. Paul said, "Don't let anyone determine your preferences regarding drink or food or what days you celebrate" (Colossians 2:16). Even though Paul chooses a negative statement it could just as easily read "You don't try to determine the preferences of others..." In context Paul reminds his readers they are in Christ – in His love – and it is that love that has put to death dividing lines and rules once set forth by the law.

Third, we must have a **hermeneutic** of trust. On one level this is **empirical** and in a broken world our senses have reason to be suspicious of others. However, in Christ we are called to faith. Through the power of God's Spirit in us we are called back to an original order of things where relationship is primary and we are open and without shame. It is a world where we yield to God and experience life as He would have it.

It is this sense of trust that enables us to read difficult passages regarding God's wrath and judgment. While we may not understand God's reasons regarding the death of innocent children (Joshua 6:21); it is trust in Him and His ways that enables us to move

through the scriptures with confidence. We can affirm that “his purposes are not ours and his ways are not our ways” (Isaiah 55:8). We can also affirm that “His ways are equitable and our ways are not” (Ezekiel 18:25).

Finally, relationship and community is the key to good interpretation. In the original order of things God saw fit to create diversity. Not all diversity is good but that which contributes to community and interdependent relationship affirms our created order. God has given his people a diversity of gifts so that we would be interdependent upon one another and dependent upon Him.

Good interpretation recognizes that there are diverse but true interpretations. Finite creatures have limited perspective and we require the community of God’s people to enlarge our understanding of His will in our life (Acts 15). Moreover, community is comprised of those who have gone before us. We need the traditions and practiced faith of those before us. We need culture that provides us with additional fruitful perspective on God’s big picture.

Practical Application



We interpret with the tools we have been given. Our heritage, traditions, truths we have embraced...all of these and more create the lens through which we view scripture. It is precisely because we have such a lens that we should read God’s word with humility and extend grace to other.

Churches of Christ are descendents of what is called the Restoration Movement or **Stone-Campbell Movement**. I will use our history in this movement to illustrate how we might practically apply the principles above. One striking example of blindness due to cultural and social influences within Churches of Christ is the well known incident between **Foy E. Wallace Jr.** and **Marshall Keeble**. The relevant materials are referenced in the Bibliography.

Wallace was disgusted that a white woman would “so far forget dignity, and lower herself” to shake hands with **Marshall Keeble**, an African American preacher. “Her husband should take her in charge,” Wallace wrote, “unless he has gone crazy too.” Wallace goes on to compliment **N.B. Hardeman**, founder of my alma mater Freed-Hardeman University, because he did not shake hands with “negroes” at his meeting or meet with them inside the meeting tent.

I am not seeking to vilify Wallace but I hope it is clear to everyone reading this that his sentiments are contrary to the gospel. They do not imitate Jesus. It seems clear that Wallace’s views arose out of a deeply embedded social understanding of segregation. He read the gospel through the lens of his cultural situation. He might even suggest that the gospel had nothing to do with segregation and divorce it from such social issues as black-white relations. He read Scripture with the tools he had and within the culture he lived and arrived at some conclusions that I hope you find very disturbing.

According to the ethic of love, **Wallace** was just dead wrong. And just as Paul rebuked Peter in Galatians 2 for his actions, there were some who stood up to Wallace's racism (see references to **Ira Y. Rice, Jr.** editor of *Christian Soldier* in the Bibliography).

One can find many positive anecdotes regarding **Wallace** and I own copies of several of his books. While I disagree with things he has written and done, I recognize that he was just a man. "And but for the grace of God, there go I." We all read Scripture with the tools we have. For that very reason, should we not extend grace to **Wallace** on this point if we desire grace for our own failures?

If you can extend grace to **Wallace**, is it not also possible to extend grace to others who arrive at conclusions that are of lesser significance?

Think About It

- In what ways do you notice you have changed regarding your understanding of Scripture during your lifetime and how has that been influenced positively or negatively by the community within which you have grown?
- Can there actually be differing interpretations of Scripture that God blesses as the Creator gives the authority to each local community?
- If you grew up in the tradition of the Churches of Christ you may be familiar with an understanding that all people can arrive at some basic truth by just reading the Bible and letting it serve as our only creed. While the simple "back to the Bible" call of the Restoration Movement has a great appeal today does this preclude us from engaging in study as a community?
- What do you think the significance of the Ethiopian's need for an "interpreter" (Acts 8:31) is regarding your own spiritual growth?
- What do you think Peter means when he says, "no utterance of Scripture comes from one's own interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20).
- In the same letter mentioned above Peter later adds that certain letters of Paul are "hard to understand which the uneducated and unstable distort to their own ruin" (2 Peter 3:16). How important do you believe humility and grace are in the process of interpretation?

2

Restore the Ancient Order

“Now we may with propriety say, that as it respects God, there is an understanding distance. All beyond that distance cannot understand God; all within it can easily understand him in all matters of piety and morality. God himself is the centre of that circle and humility is its circumference.”
(Alexander Campbell, 1846)

No one reads Scripture in a vacuum; no one can read the Bible without cultural assumptions about the nature of language and reading. **Alexander Campbell**, the most dominant figure of the **Stone-Campbell Movement**, was no different.

By self admission **Alexander Campbell** recognized his indebtedness to what historians have called **Baconianism**. You say, “I love Bacon!” Well, I’m not talking about that kind of bacon. Based upon the works of Sir Francis Bacon, **Baconianism** was the dominant scientific and philosophical understanding of the world in the early 19th century England and America. **Campbell** adapted **Baconianism** as his method of Biblical interpretation. In his effort to restore the church to the ancient order, he sought to discern the plain and simple facts of the New Testament. This was an admirable undertaking and we have much to appreciate from his work. However, a critique that we will examine later is that this method that seeks to strip all cultural, personal, economic and authority bias from the text is in itself a new cultural approach.

Campbell’s most significant writing on the subject is the first chapter “Principles of Interpretation” in his book with the rather lengthy title of, *A Connected View of the Principles and Rules by Which the Living Oracles May be Intelligibly and Certainly Interpreted*. Below is a summary of his work.

Campbell’s Hermeneutic

1. Optimism. **Campbell** draws heavily from the **Baconian** “common sense” method. He hoped for unity through the possibility of us all understanding the Bible alike. At its core **Baconianism** taught that all cultural influences could be stripped away and one could arrive at the “facts” of the matter. For **Campbell**

this meant that Sir Francis Bacon's work was the science, "by which the Christian institution may be certainly and satisfactorily ascertained" (p.13). Certainty for **Campbell** would become unity. He continues, "if all students of the Bible were taught to apply the same rules of interpretation to its pages, there would be a greater uniformity in opinion and sentiment, than ever resulted from the simple adoption of any written creed" (p.15).

2. Objectivity. "God has spoken by men, to men, for men," says **Campbell** adding, "the Bible should be understood as one man conversing with another" (p.22). In **Campbell's** common sense world there was no need for subjectivity and he sought to avoid it. **Campbell** was very much a **populist** – in tune with the spirit of American frontier. Of course this begs the question, "whose common sense?"
3. Ordered. Seeking "facts" led **Campbell** in search of order. If he could distill the facts then he believed he could arrange them in an orderly way. "If nature be a system, religion is no less so. God is 'a God of order,' and that is the same as to say he is a God of system...the Bible is a book of facts, not opinions, theories, abstract generalities, nor of verbal definitions. It is a book of awful fact, grand and sublime beyond description. These facts reveal God and man, and contain within them the reasons of all piety and righteousness, or what is commonly called religion and morality. The meaning of the Bible facts is the true biblical doctrine. History is, therefore, the plan pursued in both Testaments; for testimony has primarily to do with faith, and reasoning with the understanding. History has, we say, to do with facts – and religion springs from them. Hence, the history of the past, and the anticipation of the future, or what are usually called history and prophecy, make up exactly four-fifths of all the volumes of inspiration." (p.26).

Practical Application



Only two years after **Campbell** completed his great work on biblical interpretation, it is clear that he did not mean for his "new hermeneutic" to be so exclusive as to claim that only he had the truth and only his disciples – baptized for the remission of sins in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – would inherit the kingdom.

The Lunenburg Letters shed much light on this (the full text of this written discussion is included in Appendix A. I believe it is a significant document and gives us insight into **Campbell's** direction which was much more graceful than that of his successors)

Basically, the Lunenburg Letters were an exchange between **Alexander Campbell** and a lady from Lunenburg, VA about the practical implications of **Campbell's** teachings. While **Campbell** believed we could arrive at some common sense understanding of how one becomes a Christian, he still affirmed that there were Christians in all of the "Protestant parties."

This is significant because **Campbell** believed the Bible teaches one should repent of his sin and be baptized by immersion for the purpose of remission of those sins. He believed that the proper candidate for baptism would necessarily be a consenting adult believer. However, he clearly states that he believed God's grace would still cover those Christian people who did not understand this common sense teaching meaning he believed that one could be baptized as an infant and still be in a right relationship with Christ. Below is a quote from the exchange of letters.

There is no occasion, then, for making immersion, on a profession of faith, absolutely essential to a Christian—though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort. My right hand and my right eye are greatly essential to my usefulness and happiness, but not to my life; and as I could not be a perfect man without them, so I cannot be a perfect Christian without a right understanding and a cordial reception of immersion in its true and scriptural meaning and design. But he that thence infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision.

What I read in **Campbell's** writings is that we all have some system of interpretation. He truly believed that his understanding was correct and he was excited to uncover things within God's word that he felt had been neglected by the church over the centuries. His attitude was one of discovery and excitement at God's redemptive mission. It was not his purpose to form a new group and new system of rules in order to exclude all those in other groups. I would argue that he sought to share with the larger Christian community things that he believed would enrich their walk with Christ and perfect our service for Him.

Think About It

- Read Paul's words to the Philippians in 2:12 and 3:12-16. In light of our own history of interpretive differences what do you hear Paul calling his readers to seek first?
- **Alexander Campbell** did not shy away from the idea that we need to have an understanding of Scripture or that there is a correct way to do so. In the course of this study I will continue to share my own thoughts with you about helpful ways to interpret Scripture. Read 1 Corinthians 8 and speak about the significance of having Christians in the Corinthian church who still believed in other gods. Did Paul deny the existence of other gods? Did Paul deny the authenticity of the Christian faith of those who may have still been pantheists in this context?
- Read the Lunenburg Letters. What did you hear **Campbell** value the most as his "test" for Christian faith?
- What Scriptures speak to you about how we best affirm or test the authentic faith of those around us?

3

Movement to Monument

“The right to be wrong in matters of religious belief must be accorded, otherwise we produce hypocrites instead of persons with an enlightened belief that is fully their own.” (Francois De Fenelon, Archbishop of Cambrai, 1651-1715)

A review of the writings of **Alexander Campbell** – particularly his book entitled *The Christian System* - demonstrates that he held strong convictions about how a person can best interpret Scripture. At the same time, **Campbell** offered that God’s grace would be more than adequate for the one who earnestly seeks Christ in faith but arrives at different conclusions about the doctrines of salvation and the church (see the Lunenburg Letters in Appendix A).

Campbell did not seek to form a new denomination. Instead, his faith in common sense interpretation led him to believe that Christians in all sectarian groups could unite as Christians only. Following in the footsteps of the **Stone-Campbell Movement**, principles of biblical interpretation proposed by **Barton Stone** and **Alexander Campbell** evolved into a set of “rules” of biblical interpretation by their followers.

The Western world and particularly America was caught up in a spirit of great optimism at the end of the 19th century. The industrial revolution was in full swing; science was making great strides and for a time the world was without the awful conflict of warfare. With such a bright outlook it seemed reasonable to some that we would all soon arrive at an accord on how to best understand the Scriptures.

From this cloth, the next generation of the **Stone-Campbell Movement** was cut. In effect, Campbell’s method became a “new **hermeneutic**.” Followers of his methods put them to work and made these common sense principals, the unquestionable rule of interpretation.

In 1859, **J.S. Lamar**, a former student at **Bethany College**, wrote a book entitled the *Organon of Scripture*. Using the common sense method Lamar constructed his “temple analogy.” In his analogy, Scripture becomes a puzzle that is to be reassembled through “common sense” interpretation, which became the preferred method of interpreting God’s word by Churches of Christ.

Lamar's Organon

What we need, therefore, is not rules of interpretation, nor yet more laborious study or profounder intelligence, but the discovery and establishment of the true method indicated by the nature of the Scriptures themselves.

At the risk of being thought tedious, I must introduce one more illustration, as well to show the point we have previously been considering, as to indicate how this method is to be drawn from the Bible itself.

*Solomon's temple, we are told, was "built of stone made ready before it was brought thither; so that there was neither hammer nor ax nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was in building." If now, while those stones or blocks were all spread out upon the ground, before the building was commenced, as, for the sake of the illustration we may suppose them to have been, a skillful architect had gone with rule in hand, and carefully measured and compared every several piece, he could have determined with accuracy the place of every stone in the future building. And if he had been employed to superintend its erection, he could have had the work carried on according to the method or plan which was indicated by the stones themselves. Every piece had an appropriate place, and the marks upon it showed what was that place; and when they were all arranged agreeably to those indications, the structure was Solomon's Temple (J. S. Lamar, *Organon of Scripture*, 39-40).*

Proof-Texting

J. S. Lamar's work on Biblical interpretation became the foundation on which many who followed continued to build. Noted in the bibliography and glossary are contemporary examples of this line of thought by others: **J.D. Thomas**, **Roy Deaver**, and **Dave Miller**. It is their contention that any earnest seeker can collect the facts of the Bible, carefully arrange them and arrive at the order designed by their Author and Giver.

Such a method is known as **proof-texting**. It is a method where one searches for facts that are correlated and synthesized into the "true Christian system." In other words, the original documents as they were written and communicated to the original recipients were not sufficient. The facts in books of the Bible such as the *Acts of the Apostles* or *1st Corinthians* must be collected in a scientific process to arrive at the real point.

Interestingly, humans must fit together the "precise order" to discern the "true Christian system" instead of claiming the original Biblical documents to be sufficient in themselves. Also, it is important to note that other important Biblical scholars were influenced by the same **inductive reasoning** methods made popular by **Sir Francis Bacon** and arrived at very different conclusions.³ Further, there are now some 26 different **schisms** within the original **Stone-Campbell Movement** over how to properly discern the Biblical texts.⁷

Practical Application

Alexander Campbell certainly used induction as a tool by which he believed truth could be discerned through inference. However, the problem with the fuller explanation of **Baconism** by men like **J.S. Lamar** is that now the “true Christian system” is not possible without inductive reason. Following is a summary of Lamar’s method that became the preferred method of interpretation for Churches of Christ.



- Induction
 - Collect the facts
 - Carefully study and compare the facts
 - Whatever is exceptional is excluded
 - Contrary instances weighed
 - Draw a general truth from the specific facts
- Deduction
 - Draw a specific truth from a general truth
 - Deduction verifies the induction
 - Deduction yields a new truth that is implied by general truth and combination of previous deduced truth and explicit truth
- Erect the System (Temple of Truth)
 - Quarry out the facts and new (deduced) truth
 - Systematize them and fit them together
- Result: The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth.

Example:

2nd John 9 has quite a history of abuse by this method. Read a standard translation of this verse and then the one I have provided here. “Everyone that abandons the teaching about the Messiah is outside of God. The one who abides in the teaching about the Messiah has both the Father and the Son.”

Some translations like the KJV or NIV leave the verse up to your interpretation. Others translate the thought for you as I have done.

Anyone who does not remain in the teaching about Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God. The one who remains in that teaching, this one has both the Father and the Son (Holman Christian Standard Bible).

Anyone who goes beyond Christ’s teaching and does not continue to follow only his teaching does not have God. But whoever continues to follow the teaching of Christ has both the Father and the Son (New Century Version).

For those who take this verse to mean “anything Christ teaches” or, more specifically, “anything the New Testament teaches after Pentecost” a very wide circle can be drawn. Here is one way this principle might be applied.

- No one who goes beyond what the New Testament teaches after Pentecost is in fellowship with God.
- The New Testament teaches after Pentecost that communion is every Sunday and only on Sunday.
- Anyone who practices communion on any other day than Sunday and less than weekly is not in fellowship with God.

Are there some problems with this for you? Even if you agree that sharing communion every Sunday is an appropriate practice, are there other ways which this verse might be used to exclude many faithful people from the fellowship of God's church that might exclude even you? Following are some of my own questions about this practice.

- Mainline translations left this verse open to interpretation because of the difficulty in determining the object and subject of the sentence in Greek. There are standard translations like the Holman Christian Standard Bible that understand this verse to read "the teaching about Christ". Can we say with such certainty that it is one way or the other?
- The application of the principle above sneaks in a dispensational distinction that is necessary for its conclusion. Jesus ate the Supper on a day other than Sunday. Are we not permitted to do what Jesus did?
- It also sneaks in a notion of the "New Testament" as a written document when the Bible states otherwise. (Jeremiah 31:33).
- The phrase "doctrine of Christ" must be lifted from the historical context of 2nd John and placed in a new context.
- It ignores an example of "breaking bread" in Acts 2:42 and reinterprets it to mean something else while accepting the example of Acts 2:46 as a correct one for us. It also ignores the fact that Acts 20:11 suggests they shared communion on a Monday.
- So, this text is used to interpret the meaning of texts in the book of Acts instead of allowing Acts to self-interpret.

Think About It

- Inductive reason is certainly an appropriate tool to use in Bible study. However, if one were constructing a "temple" would they use only one tool? What other tools might be available to a builder? How might we go about selecting those tools?
- By the way, **J. S. Lamar** ultimately rejected his own method writing in 1872, Christian union, "needed no carefully drawn formularies or rigid standards of doctrine, because it was not a union in doctrines" ["Christian Union," Christian Standard 7 (18 May 1872) 156.] **Lamar** witnessed the use of his method as the one and only tool of interpretation becoming a wedge dividing Christians rather than a unifying principle. It has been said that the hardest

thing to birth is a new idea. Imagine being married to an idea as was Lamar and then choosing to accept a new one. What **Lamar** discovered was that his “new **hermeneutic**” was not all sufficient. What have you found to be insufficient about your interpretive methods? Were you willing to abandon them in order to follow God? Was that easy? Why or why not?



Cracks in the Monument

“Nothing in life has given me more pain in heart than the separation from those I have heretofore worked with and loved.” (David Lipscomb, 1899)

“**W**e see the importance of balance in the field of engineering, architecture, and mechanics. We all know what happens when a tire gets out of balance – the entire machine shakes and quakes and fails to run smooth and eventually wears out” (*Balance*, **Ira North**, p. 10).

When one arrives at a position of self-confidence that he or she has obtained the pinnacle of understanding that no one may question the status quo, BEWARE.

As noted in our previous studies, men like **Alexander Campbell** and **J.S. Lamar** demonstrated concern that the movement to simplify the interpretation of scripture had been reduced to a set of rules that had the potential to do anything but unify Christians. Assembling a system of Christian worship, work, and encouragement on which all could agree became quite problematic. There were several significant controversies that developed from what is now called **pattern theology**. Here, we will examine two.

Internal Strains

The **Restoration Movement** spawned three major groups that exist today: The Disciples of Christ, the Christian Church, and the Churches of Christ. The two largest schisms affecting what is known today as the Churches of Christ were the instrumental music issue which boiled over in the early 20th century and the institutional controversy which divided Churches of Christ in the mid 20th century.

The Instrumental Controversy.

Though instruments were used in worship assemblies by some **Restoration Movement** churches as early as the 1850's, controversy over the matter brewed for decades until a formal division was marked by the naming of a separate movement known as Churches of Christ by the US Census Bureau in 1906. Seeking an exacting pattern for how a worship assembly might be conducted some found instruments to

be permitted by scripture (Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches) and others believed scripture prohibited the use of them (Churches of Christ).

The Institutional Controversy.

In the mid-20th century a major fissure occurred in the branch of the **Restoration Movement** called the Churches of Christ. Interestingly, at roughly the same time a split was taking place within the other branch of the **Restoration Movement**, now called the Christian Church that will involve the very same hermeneutic principles we will note next (but regarding a different subject). Within Churches of Christ the concern was whether an individual congregation may support an institution such as an orphan's home with money from the church treasury.

Regulative and Normative

These controversies are concerned with two interpretive principles called the **regulative principle** and the **normative principle**. First proposed by church reformers in the 1600's, the **regulative principle** was first concerned with how the Bible ordered public worship. It was a principle developed largely in response to public worship activities within the Roman Catholic church that reformers found to be unbiblical. Essentially, the **regulative principle** sought a "thus saith the Lord" for any activity conducted within the Christian assembly.

As the Protestant Reformation expanded so did the ideas as to how one would enact the changes that were deemed important. For instance, Martin Luther, one of the original reformers maintained that it was not necessary to remove all the old trappings of Roman Catholicism (**vestaments**, liturgical calendars, feasts and fasts) for they had become a sort of **Normative** for Christian expression. Much of what has been called "High Church" is an expression of this principle. Groups like the Lutherans, Methodists, and Anglicans stressed the normative principle in contrast to the regulative principle which was stressed by Protestant groups like Presbyterians and Anabaptists.

In our own movement the tension over these matters is illustrated by **Thomas Campbell's** break with Presbyterianism in 1808 in the first detailed recording of a heresy trial in United States history according to William Herbert Hanna. Campbell was charged with heresy because he refused to withhold communion from individuals who would not affirm a creed that conformed to the regulative understanding of the Chartiers Presbytery of which he was a member.

After breaking with the Presbytery and then beginning to meet in homes of various like minded individuals, Thomas Campbell set forth his motto which has become a guiding star of the **Restoration Movement**. "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." What is interesting about this statement is that it seems to affirm that neither end of the interpretive continuum (regulative or normative) can be fully defended. Campbell is affirming what we will call a "both / and position."

Strengths and Weaknesses¹

Regulative Principle – only do those things specifically warranted in Scripture

- Strengths
 - Seeks to define worship by God and His Word
 - Tries to honor the Bible and hold it in high esteem
 - Draws a ditch between the world and the church; keeping out syncretism, worldliness, and paganism
- Weaknesses
 - Separates worship in the assembly from worship in everyday life
 - Insufficient: doesn't answer questions about things not mentioned in the Bible (length of assembly, approved seating, order of worship)
 - Legalistically applied making rules with extreme applications that are not in the Bible (Psalm only singing)

Normative Principle – things are allowed unless forbidden by Scripture

- Strengths
 - Sees the Bible as principle and gives flexibility for methods
 - Allows cultural contextualization
 - Treats gathered and scattered worship the same. When you live throughout the week you live by the normative principle.
- Weaknesses
 - Opens the door to syncretism. Mixes biblical principles with ungodly worldly principles
 - Makes our enjoyment and not God's pleasure the object of our worship.
 - Elevates unbiblical elements to the point where they squeeze out biblical elements.

The preceding strengths and weaknesses are proposed by Mark Driscoll in a sermon at the Mars Hill Church in Seattle. Driscoll represents that he resides in neither camp since both principles are of man. He makes the following statement about his understanding of Christian worship as it is taught in Scripture:

All of Christian life is ceaseless worship of God the Father, through the mediatorship of God the Son by the indwelling power of God the Spirit, doing what God commands in Scripture, not doing what God forbids in Scripture, in culturally contextualized ways for the furtherance of the gospel when both gathered for adoration and scattered for action in joyous response to God's glorious grace.

Think About It

- 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is the a scripture from which Protestant Reformers developed the concept called **Sola Scriptura**. Does this mean that the Bible is the only authority?
- How does scripture interface with worship?
- Read Hebrews 13:15-16 and discuss how the author looks at worship from both a gathered activity for the purpose of adoration and a scattered activity for the purpose service.
- This all raises the question: When is Scripture to be read prescriptively and when is it to be read descriptively?

5

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

*“He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own sect of church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all.” (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection: Moral and Religious Aphorisms*, 1840)*

“I hope that the discussion thus far has been deemed as a balanced approach that appreciate the sincere efforts of people from different camps to ascertain God’s direction for our lives. It seems that a blow was dealt to the Churches of Christ as a movement during the time of the institutional controversy – a blow from which the movement has not fully recovered. What I mean by that is that the **hermeneutic** that sought to order church life more from a regulative principle basically imploded under the weight of that controversy.

Seeking to rigorously apply regulative principles went strongly against the instincts of many (e.g., refusal to use money from the church treasury to help the unbelieving poor). It led to confusion about how we believe what we believe. At the same time there was a renewed sense of the historical meaning of the text and a return to a **historical-grammatical** reading. All of this discontent led to the discussion in Churches of Christ over “The New Hermeneutic” in the 1980’s and 1990’s.[†] More about that issue later. What can be commended about the hermeneutical approaches of the first few generations of the **Restoration Movement**? And, what can we critique?

Appreciation

HISTORY: I appreciate Campbell’s original intent to approach the text in a historical rather than scholastic fashion. Campbell reminded us that Scripture is primarily (4/5ths) history and that Scripture is itself part of history. Consequently, it must be read as any other human book that is written in human language by humans for humans. The historical character of Scripture and its historical setting must

fundamentally shape how we read it. As a result, Campbell embraced the historical-grammatical method in contrast to the more scholastic methods of some of his forebearers and contemporaries

INDUCTION: I appreciate that an inductive reading of Scripture is the beginning point of the hermeneutic. The **Stone-Campbell Movement** has always emphasized reading the Bible and the hermeneutical method has always emphasized an openness to the inductive “facts” of Scripture. Part of this commitment is to begin with Scripture rather than with tradition or a creedal commitment, and that part of this commitment is to remain open to the inductive reshaping of our hearts and minds by what Scripture teaches rather than remaining entrenched in some traditional notions because that is the way we have always believed or that is the tradition in which we were raised. It has not always worked that way as is true of all human beings, but it is the commitment of the method to be open to the text through induction.

RATIONAL: I appreciate Campbell’s original intent and the continued emphasis in the movement to use the divine gift of human reason to understand Scripture. Their opposition to “mystical” or “enthusiast” readings of Scripture is important. They, of course, still practiced a devotional or sanctifying reading of Scripture but the interpretation of Scripture is mediated through the rational understanding of the words of the text rather than through subjective revelations or “inner light”. The use of reason, then, is a positive dimension of the Stone-Campbell hermeneutic. It becomes problematic, however, when we absolutize human reason and believe that human inferences are more significant and more binding than the contextual, historical statements of the text itself.

SOLA SCRIPTURA: I appreciate the central place that Scripture has in the Stone-Campbell hermeneutic. **Sola Scriptura** as a slogan is subject to a range of interpretations—many of which I would not accept. What I mean by the phrase is that Scripture is the “norming norm” as opposed to other norms such as tradition or existential experience or even the living community of faith. I will explain this more later, but suffice it to say at this point that I think a value of the **Stone-Campbell** hermeneutic is the priority of the text of Scripture as a word from God.

GOAL: I appreciate the original goal which Campbell’s new hermeneutic served. His intent was to provide a means by which people could find common ground or unity. His vision was not a uniformity based on his understanding of the “ancient order,” but it was a unity that shared a common faith in Jesus and a common apostolic practice. These, according to Campbell, were explicit in the text and they were rather minimal (e.g., one fact, one act [immersion], and one day [assembling] in conjunction with a Christian character).

Critique

It is probably clear to the reader that I have some significant criticisms concerning how our movement evolved. I could not agree more with my previous remarks about the danger of believing one has arrived at the pinnacle of understanding. So, I offer my

criticisms not as a condemnation but as an observation and I recognize that we have all fallen short of God's glory.

ENLIGHTENMENT ASSUMPTIONS: The optimism of the Enlightenment Age and the progress of Baconian science was blinding on some points. If everyone uses the same hermeneutic, then everyone will come to the same conclusions. I have noted that Campbell's hermeneutic is nearly identical to that of Charles Hodge, the great Reform theologian. Another assumption is that there are such things as "uninterpreted facts" (or, brute facts, or a facts that needs no interpretation). Indeed, it was a common maxim within some quarters of the **Stone-Campbell** heritage that the "Bible needs no interpretation." This assumption can generate either naiveté (interpreters do not recognize their own setting) or arrogance ("if you can't see it the way I see it then something is wrong with you") or both. The assumption is that we can remain fundamentally objective in our reading of Scripture as if we are unaffected by our setting.

BACONIAN INDUCTION OF "FACTS": While induction is a necessary tool in the study of Scripture, Baconian induction tends to override the historical context. This form of induction isolates the "facts" of the text and decontextualizes them by extracting "timeless" propositions which take on a new meaning as we put them into a different context than the narrative flow of Scripture itself. When we isolate "facts" we distort them. When we take a "fact" out of its context and place it in a syllogism, we give it a new context. This naturally distorts the meaning and this enables us to more easily manipulate the "fact" to our own interest or agenda.

NON-HISTORICAL/NON-TRADITIONAL READINGS: It was a common maxim, inaugurated by Campbell himself, to value reading the Bible as if one has never read it before; to read the Bible with a "blank slate". Supposedly, if people would read Scripture disconnected from their own historical situation, disconnected from their tradition, and disconnected from others, then the pure message of Scripture would be objectively written on their minds. But this is a myth; it can't be done. Further, I am sure that it should not be done. Why should I read Scripture forgetting all that I have already read in Scripture? It is rather arrogant, I think, to read Scripture disconnected from community (the living community as well as the past community of interpreters). We learn from others—past and present, and we hear Scripture more clearly in community than as individuals. The Baconian method, however, extracts Scripture from its historical context, from the living tradition of the church and from the living community of faith to read it as a scientific, objective, even individualistic enterprise

DEPENDENCE ON INFERENCE AND COMMON SENSE: One of the basic problems with Command, Example, and Inference is that ultimately it all comes down to Inference. Binding examples are recognized by an implied command. Without inferring that a command lies behind the example, then the example is not binding. Binding examples are implied commands! It all depends on the inference. So, for example, we know—according to the hermeneutic—that the first day of the week is the exclusive day for the Lord's Supper because there is an implied command to eat the Lord's Supper and God would not command us to do something like that without

telling us when to do it. Consequently, the practice of the church in Troas in Acts 20:7 becomes a binding example because we know that God must have commanded to eat on that day and only on that day since God must tell us somewhere in the New Testament (somewhere in the constitution) when to eat the Lord's Supper. But we also know that it is not necessary to eat in an upper room or only at night (even though those are the only circumstances of eating the Supper we have in the New Testament—even Jesus himself ate at night in the upper room, but he does not count since it was before Pentecost anyway) because there is no implied command. How do we know the difference between whether there is an implied command or not? It seems it is either another inference (like “God would surely tell us about X”) or “common sense” (any person with a “good heart” can see the difference).

Inference also shapes how we understand the silence of Scripture. It is not mere silence alone that prohibits, but silence plus an inference of some kind. Silence is prohibitive if we infer that the silence is intentional. (e.g., the use of instrumental music or vocal music). The “law of exclusion” is itself an inference! And further it is not Scripture that defines this. It is human wisdom and inference as well...or by “common sense.” Of course, inferences are not necessarily bad; indeed, they are necessary. But the problem here is that inference becomes the centerpiece of “legal authority” rather than the explicit statements of Scripture.

ILL SUITED TO THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE: What the Baconian hermeneutic plus a constitutional patternism seeks from Scripture belongs to a different genre of literature than is present in the New Testament. If Campbell was correct that we should read Scripture as it was given to us in human language for humans written by humans, then we must respect the nature of the writings of the original documents in the New Testament. And the New Testament does not present itself as a legal brief but as theological biography, theological history, missional letters and apocalyptic vision. None of these should be read as legal texts with legal precision and a legal hermeneutic ill-suited for them. Interestingly lawyers excelled at reading the New Testament through the traditional hermeneutic in mid-twentieth century Churches of Christ, e.g., the several institutional-non-institutional debates between Guy N. Woods and Roy E. Cogdill—both were lawyers and neither could agree with the other! To read it as a legal brief or constitution is to read it in a different way than how God gave it to us. This is fundamentally unfaithful to Scripture.

PATTERNISM: Many people have strong opinions about this term. Recent and historic discussions within Churches of Christ have not generally been about whether there is a pattern, but what kind of pattern, how does one discern the pattern, how detailed is the pattern, and what belongs to the pattern. This, I believe, correctly assumes that we might seek more than one pattern. Three examples follow:

- **Historical:** The goal is to *reduplicate* the church as it exists within the New Testament documents. The source of this pattern is the explicit historical witness of the documents (command or example). The pattern only exists in the explicit testimony of the documents. The pattern is historical in

character. The mantra “it is safe to do what they did” fits this method. This is essentially Alexander Campbell’s intent though I recognize I have oversimplified what he is doing.

- **Constructed:** The goal is to *construct* a pattern out of the data of the New Testament because the text itself neither explicitly details a pattern for the church nor provides a specific blueprint. Building on historical patternism, data from the New Testament is collected, collated, harmonized, systematized and arranged in its proper order to fully detail the pattern because there are implicit as well explicit particulars to the pattern. The pattern is the result of a systematic analysis of the data in the whole NT; it is a form of system-building. It is temple-building. This is essentially Lamar’s intent and was adopted by Churches of Christ throughout most of the last 150 years.
- **Theological:** The goal is to *explore* the story of God in such a way as to participate in it. Rather than building a temple, this method explores the temple (Scripture) God has given in order to carry out his mission. The pattern for the church is the redemptive work of God in history through Jesus Christ. The New Testament (in continuity with the Old Testament and only fully understood in light of the Old Testament) is a historical record of the mighty acts of God which call us to imitate God’s work in Jesus. The pattern is Jesus and as disciples we follow Jesus in order to participate in God’s mission in the world.

I think the first (historical) is too naive—no one does exactly what the churches of the New Testament did and we all recognize that some things the churches of the New Testament practiced we don’t practice. The second (constructed) is too complicated, too dependent on human constructs (systems), and expects something from Scripture that does not fit the nature of Scripture itself. The third (theological)—well—that is where we are headed.

Think About It

- What text(s) found in the New Testament Scriptures speak to us about the assembling of Christians together?
- What text(s) in the New Testament Scriptures have been used as authorities on how we should regulate our gathered worship?
- Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 and discuss it in light of the regulative and normative principles
- Discuss your understanding of Acts 2:46 and defend it. Observe whether you find yourself defending your interpretation based on a system or the context. What about the giving in Acts 2:44-45, should it be for Christians only?

6

Behold the Pattern

“Denying a pattern is a loose and liberal view of the New Testament that I believe is not only unscriptural but leads quickly to an anarchical approach to Christianity which disregards the authority of Scripture” (Philip Owens, Preacher @ Elgin Church of Christ, Rogersville, AL)

“I am in full agreement with Owens’ statement that a pattern exists. Where our paths diverge is on the subject of how one defines pattern. Without meaning to be unkind to the author of the above quote I would suggest that I hear him saying, “Denying a pattern as I see it is a loose and liberal view...” Why would I say that? Well, the author seems to propose that if you aren’t following his pattern that you have no pattern at all.

As we began this exploration I asked in the discussion section of chapter one whether God might bless differing interpretations of Scripture. One can conclude that the answer to that question can be “yes” when you look at the diverse Christian community in the first century. It is clear, for instance, that God blessed Jewish Christians who practiced circumcision to His glory (Acts 16:3) and Gentile Christians who did not observe this practice (Galatians 2:3). This begs a question. If a person today sought to follow the pattern of the New Testament reasoning, “If I reduplicate or construct the pattern of work and worship followed by the early church I will be safe,” then who would I follow, Timothy or Silas?

Stop and think

Based on a straightforward reading of Acts 20:7-12 which elements of the narrative ought we to bind today?

Read 1 Corinthians 11 – 14. Is it possible to have multiple interpretations of what one might expect to occur in a public gathering of Christians if we were to reduplicate this today?

What Pattern?

In the last chapter I submitted that one might examine the pattern of scripture from a theological perspective. Theology is an intimidating word for many people. However, it does not entail some sort of academic training. Quite the contrary, “theology” is primarily living life in connection with God and His story. It is the theological training of discernment, wisdom, and compassion that comes from walking with God daily.

So, this “Theological Pattern” is not about constructing or reduplicating God’s temple, it is about exploring it. It is understanding Jesus as the covenant (Isaiah 42:6; 49:8). Jesus is the pattern and the Bible is the historical record of the mighty acts of God pointing us to Jesus.

When we seek to make Scripture the pattern it takes the focus off Jesus and can distort the pattern significantly. How so? Well, it is very possible to use the same regulative principles of interpretation and arrive at very different understandings of how to live out Scripture. This creates a dilemma in which one is left confused about which “pattern” to choose. To one person or the other they can both seem simple and common sensical.

Theological Pattern

So, the theological pattern is fundamentally about the wisdom to live with God in the daily moments of life. It is a God-formed heart with the desire to know Him and love Him as the key ingredient. What are some elements of this pattern that still sound familiar to us:

SIMPLE: Reading the text of Scripture is, at one level, simple. But at another level it is quite complex. One may think of this distinction in theological terms (e.g., milk and solid food, Hebrews 5:11-14). But I am thinking primarily in terms of the hermeneutical task. Reading Scripture is simple in the sense that the broad outlines of the story, the redemptive momentum, and the central themes (e.g. love God and love neighbor) are accessible to readers at the most basic level. There are dimensions to Scripture that are as “obvious” as “my grandma’s Bible” even with a flat reading of the text. It is not necessary for a to be a scholar to embrace of the central thrust of Scripture..

HISTORICAL: The complexity of reading Scripture arises when we remember that these are historical texts. They participate in the culture in which they were written (e.g., they were originally written in Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic!)—not only in terms of language used but also customs, clothing, conventions, etc. This introduces complexity because, at one level, to read these texts as intended we must read as them the message of God located in a specific historical culture because that is what they are. To read them otherwise or to read them in a way that totally ignores or even denies this is to read Scripture unfaithfully, that is, it reads Scripture in a way that undermines the mode in which Scripture is given to us. The scholar is necessary—at various levels—for this historical reading of the text.

SPIRITUAL: Reason is a gift of God. It is a tool for connecting with creation, people and God. But it is insufficient by itself and neither is it the ultimate formative influence of our lives. What I call “spiritual” here is a recognition that God encounters us through the text or in connection with the text in ways that transcend our rational categories. This, in fact, is more formative in our theological development than the rational (words, thoughts, ideas). It is a recognition that through the hermeneutical task we, “FEEL” after God and he encounter us; that the goal is wisdom rather than propositional data, love rather than knowledge. The one who forms this relationship, mediates it and gives it life is the Holy Spirit.

COMMUNAL: I certainly believe everyone should read the Bible for themselves. Everyone needs to encounter God in this way (as well as other ways—I do not limit encounters with God to reading Scripture; e.g., we encounter God at the Lord’s Table). However, I don’t think individual study is sufficient. Individualism breeds arrogance. Communal reading of Scripture breeds humility. And with humility comes an interpretation that is shaped by the heart of God, led by the Spirit and molded into the image of Christ. Community means more than my local congregation though that is a wonderful place to start. It also means more than my small group or my particular tradition or denomination. Communal involves the whole history of the church. We need to read Scripture with the eyes of others as well without our own eyes since our eyes can deceive us. We recognize our own blindness by listening to others. Consequently, tradition (how the church through history has read and practiced Scripture) must play a significant role in our reading of Scripture. Otherwise, arrogance rather than humility will characterize our **hermeneutical** results and with arrogance comes a loss of the Spirit.

Think About It

- In light of what you have read in this chapter, what does it mean to “know the Word of God”?
- What is the Word of God?
- Discuss what you have learned about the subject of baptism over your lifetime from the theological pattern perspective: simple, historical, spiritual, communal.



The Nature of Scripture

“There’s a lovely Hasidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, ‘Why on our hearts, and not in them?’ The rabbi answered, ‘Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your heart, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.’” (Ann Lamott, [Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith](#))

“S”cripture comes to us as human literature. It is written by humans for humans in human language. Whatever it communicates, then, it communicates through the medium of finite, limiting, bounded human language. In the context of the discussion begun in the previous chapter – Jesus is the pattern – we then must beg the question, “What is the nature of scripture, if it is not ‘the pattern?’” In this chapter I will raise only three points. I am sure that much more could be said but three points seems biblical to me and it may be enough to chew on for now.

Scripture & Analogous Knowledge of God

That God willingly and enthusiastically participates in our humanity should give us pause. He is entering our experience in and through Scripture. But, we must keep that clear. We are not fully entering God’s economy. What I mean is that He is approaching us because we are incapable of approaching Him. In approaching us, God has done so in a necessarily cultural and limited fashion. I am not speaking of **cultural relativism** where truth is up for grabs. I only intend that because we are human, God has chosen to communicate with us in a language we can understand...within time...and within culture.

We are not reading God-speech but reading what God says to us through human language. God has accommodated himself to the limits of human language in talking about himself in much the same way that we accommodate ourselves to three year olds—but with an infinite difference, of course.

This means that Scripture participates in **analogous** rather than **univocal** or **equivocal** language about God. When we say “God is love,” we do not understand “love” with a one-to-one correspondence to the mind of God. The divine understanding of love is far beyond our understanding. Our language about God is not **univocal**—it is not equivalent to what God thinks; we don’t comprehend “love” in the depth that God himself does. But neither is our language about God **equivocal** so that there is no connection between our knowledge and God’s knowledge. An **equivocal** knowledge of God would be wholly experientially-based rather than reasoned and it disconnects us from knowing anything about God.

Our knowledge of God, then, is **analogous**. We are not wholly without knowledge of God as if we can only experience him (**equivocal**) but neither is our knowledge equivalent to God’s knowledge of himself (**univocal**). Instead, our knowledge of God is historically conditioned. We know about God by his entrance into history. We know what love is by God’s act in Jesus (entrance into history) and His interpretation of that act in human language (Scripture). This means that our reasoned knowledge about God is not only shaped by historical conditions but is located within the framework of history with human beings as recorded in Scripture.

One significant implication of this point is that we should not expect rational precision in our understanding of God when we read Scripture. **Analogy** does not have the function of complete, exact and correspondent communication. It gives enough understanding to enable performance, that is, to live God’s intent for us and participate in the drama. The goal is not knowledge *per se*, but embodiment. The goal is not learning a “to do list”. It is about participation in the story of God so that we become the images (*imago dei*) of God in the world. Exactitude diverts us from the real goal of analogous understanding—to become what God intended us to be as his created images in creation.

Human Interpretation

What we read we must read according to the standards of human communication, not God-speech. We humans cannot read God-speech but we can read God’s communication to us through human words. Consequently, we must read the Bible as is—as it is given to us, as it presents itself to us.

This entails that we read the text within the frame of the literary **genre** in which it is communicated. This means that we cannot impose on the text a meaning that is not suitable, contextual or appropriate to the genre, language and context—literary, historical and cultural—in which the text appears.

Consequently, the faithful reading of Scripture means that we read it as is. We read it according to the specific **genre** in which the text is offered. We read Psalms as poetry, Chronicles as history, Revelation as apocalyptic, Paul’s epistles as letters, etc. The importance of this point lies not only in good interpretation, but it is also lies in the tendency to override the specific genre with a broader one:

- Some turn a letter into a legal brief,
- a historical narrative into a legal precedent,
- or an apocalyptic text into a literal reading of history (as in the historical-continuous interpretation offered by John T. Hinds in the *Gospel Advocate* commentary).

For example, if we adopt a constitutional model for the New Testament, we not only impose a foreign literary **genre** upon the text in but we override the actual **genre** in which the books of the New Testament are given to us and thereby undermine the intent of the text.

The constitutional reading then forces texts to read differently than they were intended to be read by the authors themselves. This, in effect, undermines the authority of the text because it substitutes a foreign literary model for the ones which the New Testament documents actually are! It forces the text to function in a way and to say something that they were never intended to do or say.

Story Above the Story

If the humanity of Scripture is visible in its language, **genre**, authors, etc., the word of God is visible in the unity of the story above the story. Remarkably, this unity does not dictate the humanity of Scripture (e.g., its own diversity) or override the situation of Scripture (e.g., the variety of **genre**). This among other things is what makes it so beautiful.

Still, the unity is present. And, one can witness the movement of the story of God through the unfolding history of God with humanity. The unity of Scripture is rooted in the identity of God, His intent for creation, and how He invests in the people of God.

I call this unity the **metanarrative** of Scripture. I think this term better explains what I mean about a story that is above or beyond the story. What I mean is that the story of God is embedded throughout the various writings that we call the Old and New Testaments. This embedded story is found in historical accounts of: patriarchs wandering and sojourning, Israel redeemed, letters to missional communities in Rome or Colossae, etc...

This unity is not a temple constructed out of isolated data within the text. Rather, the text itself is the temple to be explored and ultimately embodied in our own stories as we learn to participate in the story of God. The **metanarrative**—as witnessed to, interpreted and applied within the text of Scripture—becomes our narrative.

The divine message of Scripture is its witness to the mighty acts of God, the interpretation of those acts and the application of their meaning to humans seeking to participate in the story of God.

Think About It

Consider how the uniqueness of Scripture is not seen in holding cultures at arm's length, but in the belief that Scripture is the only book in which God speaks incarnately.

In light of what you have read in this chapter, why do different parts of the Old and New Testaments say different things about the same thing?

- Matthew 2 talks about Hosea 11 but uses a whole new interpretation
- John's Gospel has stories "out of order" when compared to the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.
- Chronicles and Kings speak about the same historical events but have some different information.
- Read Proverbs 26:4-5. What should we do?

8

The Function of Scripture

“Torah does in human life what the sun does within creation: it brings the light, power, and searching probing beat of Yahweh’s presence into the depths of the human heart” (N. T. Wright).

“Assuming that Scripture is by nature a story embedded in a story – an unfolding of God’s experience among and for his people then we are left seeking an answer to what is the function? What is the purpose of Scripture? Its nature is at one moment divine and at the same time human; but what is the point of it all? Why Scripture? I would suggest that Scripture has three such functions. Let’s begin.

A Witness of God’s Mighty Acts

Scripture describes what God has done in creation and redemption. It is a record of the mighty acts of God. It is history, but it is not mere history. It is a redemptive-historical record. The writers of Scripture are not interested in mere facts about Abraham, David or Hezekiah. Rather, they are interested in the divine-human engagement within history. They are interested in telling the story of God’s relationship with his creation and people. One function of Scripture is descriptive.

An Interpretation of God’s Mighty Acts

While descriptive, Scripture is never merely descriptive. It is always interpretative. Whether narrative, poetry, wisdom, apocalyptic or epistles, Scripture interprets the meaning of God’s acts. We might know from Tacitus and Suetonius that Jesus died under Pontius Pilate in Judaea, but only the narrations of the Gospels, the epistolary explanations and the Hebraic anticipations interpret the meaning and significance of that death for us. There are not “brute facts” or “isolated facts” within Scripture; every “fact” is interpreted and given significance within the story. And that significance is rooted in the movement of God within creation and redemption for the sake of his goals for his people and his cosmos.

An Application of God's Mighty Acts

Interpretation is not simply some stand-alone moral point. Without application, the description and interpretation is a dead-end.

- Isaiah applies the meaning of the Exodus to Israel centuries after the event itself.
- Isaiah 40-55 plays on the themes of older material (the Exodus) in new, creative, and formative ways to help God's people see His deliverance with new eyes.
- Paul applies the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ to Romans divided between Jewish and Gentile house churches.
- Revelation interprets the mighty acts of God in history for the seven churches of Asia in order to encourage faithfulness and perseverance.

Practical Application

I would suggest that Scripture is fundamentally an interpreted record of God's mighty acts applied to the people of God. Essentially, Scripture = witness + interpretation + application.



EXAMPLE: Ephesians 3:2-6

Here's my translation of the text.

²I know I've told you about how God arranged for me to receive his grace and pass it along to you. ³I summarized earlier about how he has uncovered a mystery for me. ⁴As you read along, you can also experience the same insight I received regarding the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not available for so long to our fathers but has now been made clear by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶So here it is. Through the gospel, Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members of one body, participants in the same promise in Christ Jesus.

This is a heavy weighty text, but my interest is the specific function Paul assigns to his letter. What is the function of Ephesians, according to Paul?

- Paul has received insight (understanding) into the mystery of Christ.
- The mystery of Christ is the work of God in Christ through the Spirit to which Paul has just testified in Ephesians 1-2.
- This has been revealed to him (and others—apostles and prophets) by the Spirit.

- He writes so that the Ephesians might understand his insight into that mystery.
- He identifies, at least in part, the mystery as the fellowship of the gospel in Christ Jesus.
- His letter applies this work of God—the creation of one body—to the racial and cultural distinctions between Jews and Gentiles for the sake of uniting the body of Christ in communal practice rather than simply in theological theory.

Ephesians, as one example, embodies the function of Scripture. Paul, gifted by the Spirit and given revelation about what God has done in Christ, writes to share his understanding of the mystery of Christ with fellow-believers.

- Paul *describes* (witnesses to) the work of God in Christ through the Spirit in Ephesians 1-3, that is, the election of the Father, the atoning work of Jesus and the seal of the Spirit. This is the mighty act of the Triune God for our redemption.
- Paul *interprets* the meaning of this work for his readers, that is, how the mystery breaks down racial, cultural and epochal distinctions between human beings.
- In Ephesians 4-6 he *applies* the meaning of God’s mighty acts by encouraging (using a substantial number of imperatives which are absent except for one [2:11] in chapters 1-3) conformation to the image of God in Christ.

What Do I Do With This

Scripture, therefore, may be said to be the practical application of theology (the mystery of Christ) to specific situations (whether Ephesus, Corinth, Seven Churches of Asia, etc.). Scripture is **practical theology**.

Through Scripture’s own application of the mystery of God to those different situations we “see” (discern) the theology itself—we come to understand the mystery of Christ. Now, as disciples of Jesus, we take that same theology and apply it to our situations—whether in Dothan, India or Nicaragua.

In effect, what we really do is not so much apply Scripture (the bare text) but apply the theology (the mystery) that Scripture teaches. The task is not to reproduce the “stuff” of Scripture or merely repeat Scripture, but to know the mystery of Christ (the mighty acts of God), understand the meaning of that mystery (theology), and apply its meaning to the new contexts in which we minister as disciples of Jesus.

Thus, the task of “restoration” is not the mere reproduction of the historic practices of the early church—to simply do what the early church did—but the

reapplication of its theology in a new setting. Our task is the recontextualization of the mystery of Christ in the contemporary world. Our task is to bear witness to, interpret and apply the meaning of what God has done. Scripture models this for us and guides in our contemporary task.

Think About It

- Doesn't it seem like the people who received the words of God in their culture and their time seemed to be very excited about the redemptive nature of what they heard and witnessed?
- Why do you think you and I often have negative reactions to parts of scripture? (1 Corinthians 11:6-7; 1 Peter 2:18)
- Why do some biblical instructions have ongoing significance and force in their entirety, while the continued application of others is limited in some manner?

9

The Story of Scripture

“There are Christians who read their newspaper with more genre sensitivity than they do the scriptures” (Dr. Graham A. Cole, Professor at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University).

“If I were to report to you that England has, just now, been invaded and that there is chaos from one end to the other of the British Isles, buildings were on fire, and the white flag is already being raised, you would probably question my sanity. In this age of instant information you would be very puzzled. No one has tweeted the news; the 24 hour networks are silent. But, I note that I read it in the newspaper this very morning. It even named the offending invader. His name is Hagar the Horrible. You would get the joke pretty quickly.

Yet, “there are Christians who read their newspapers with more genre sensitivity than they do the scriptures,” reports Graham Cole. He adds, “they move effortlessly from cartoon, to editorial, to advertisement, to TV guide, to reportage, to opinion. However, when it comes to scripture a naïve literalism prevails.”

There is a story woven throughout the Bible that arouses the reader in any age. While we might wince about directives given to destroy whole people groups, misunderstand the treatment given women, or hold our nose when it seems slavery is affirmed, there is universal acclaim given to the message that proclaims, “good news to the poor, freedom to the prisoner and sight to the blind” (Luke 4:18).

To focus on Scripture as story is not to deny or affirm the historicity of every individual account in the word. Instead, due weight is given to the overarching narrative of Scripture – its Christocentric focus – with a literary and historical sensitivity that surpass a flat or wooden reading meant to hunt, gather, and assemble facts. Pattern is found in Scripture but that pattern is Jesus. It is the cycle of Creation, Chaos, and Redemption that matters. Let’s look at that narrative.

Five Acts of the Theo-drama

- **Act One: Creation.** The divine act of creation declares the intent of God. God created what he wanted for the purposes for which he wanted. A theology of creation is an essential beginning point for thinking theologically in the **hermeneutical** task. We see God's intent for communion. We see his purpose for humanity as representatives of divine life upon the earth—we are the images (icons) of God who participate in the divine tasks of creating and caring for the creation. We see the divine intent to rest (Sabbath) in his creation, that is, to delight in, enjoy and commune with his beloved world. Unfortunately, in the creation narratives and early human history, we see humanity assert autonomy (e.g., in the Garden) and even assume divine prerogatives (e.g., Babel) with all the accompanying chaos, violence, oppression and immorality that comes in the way of humanity's degenerative spiral away from God.
- **Act Two: Israel.** God graciously entered into covenant with a people who were called to represent (image) God in the brokenness of the Ancient Near East. God graciously initiates a relationship (e.g., call of Abraham), grounds that relationship in redemptive acts (e.g., Exodus) and invites them to live as the light of God among the nations (e.g., Sinai). The story of Israel is the story of a people struggling to live as the images of God in a fallen world. The covenant of love that binds them to God guides them in living out God's intent for his creation in the idolatrous Ancient Near East. The Torah provides the origins and law of the covenant, the histories narrate the story of God's redemptive engagement with his people, the prophets call the people to embrace the covenantal life, and the wisdom schools apply the life of God to the practical investment of the covenant in life. God's pursuit of Israel, God's investment in their lives and God's guidance for life in the world is a model for believers; a way to listen to God's story—God's values, intent, goals, desires and to learn from Israel's example—both positive and negative.
- **Act Three: Ministry of Jesus.** Whereas Israel—as with all of us—failed to image God in the world, God entered the world in the person of the Logos (the Word). The Logos became flesh and dwelt among us. He is the true image of God; the one who fully embodies God's intent and desire for participation in the story of God. The Incarnate Son reveals the Father. Specifically, the ministry of Jesus is the in-breaking of the **eschatological** kingdom of God. We see in the ministry of Jesus the reality of God's kingdom—healing the sick, raising the dead, including the outsiders, good news for the poor. The ministry of Jesus is an **eschatological** ministry that bears witness to the nature of the kingdom of God, that is, it embodies the divine intent for creation itself as the curse is reversed.
- **Act Four: Church.** The church—the people/community of God—is the body of Christ; it is the presence of Jesus in the world through the Spirit. It is the image of

God in the world; the temple in whom God dwells to minister redemptively in the world.

- **Church within Scripture** — The church, as described in the New Testament, lives out the ministry of Jesus. They embody Jesus' ministry in their own lives as disciples committed to follow Jesus. The record of the New Testament bears witness to the act of God in Christ, interprets its meaning and applies that theology to the life of the church. The apostolic practices of the church are designed to embody and follow the ministry of Jesus. The church in the New Testament sometimes did this well (e.g., Acts 2-4) and sometimes did this rather badly (e.g., Corinth).
- **Church throughout History** — The history of the church is an attempt to live out the story of God in Jesus through the centuries. Living out the fourth act is a difficult task, as difficult as it was for Israel to live out the intent of God for itself. Sometimes the church has done this well and sometimes badly.
- **Church in Contemporary Experience** — The fourth act continues into the present as believers seek to live out the story of God in Jesus now. Sometimes the church does this well and sometimes badly.
- **Act Five: Eschaton**. The consummation is the goal of God. It is the renewal of his creation where the fullness of the Triune God might dwell with the people of God in the cosmos. It is community restored and enjoyed. It is a renewed creation in which God rests.

The Flow of the Theo-Drama

I imagine there are several ways to think about this **theo-drama**. One could think of the climax as Act Five (Eschaton). And there is a sense in which this is true since it is the goal of the divine drama. However, I think it is better to see the ministry of Jesus as the climax.

Creation provides the stage where divine communion is experienced. But when humanity sought its own autonomy and pursued its own agenda, conflict entered. The drama then proceeded as an escalation of conflict even though God sought redemptive measures in Israel. Those measures ultimately highlighted the conflict as Israel cycled through moments of rest to rebellion to punishment to deliverance and back to rest (e.g., period of the Judges; exile and restoration, etc.).

In the ministry of Jesus we have both a divine engagement in the past (e.g, Jesus is a Jewish prophet in a series of prophets) but also is the arrival of the future. He is the eschatological Son of Man. He is the presence of the future where the curse is reversed in his ministry (e.g., the dead are raised). His ministry is the presence of the fullness of the future kingdom of God upon the earth. His death is an **eschatological** death and not merely a physical one. His resurrection is a transformation and not merely

resuscitation. In this sense, the ministry of Jesus is the climax of the **theo-drama** because it is also the instantiation of the **eschatological** goal itself.

In dramatic terms, what precedes the climax is the rising conflict and what follows it is the emerging triumph of the climactic event till the ultimate goal is reached. The story of the church is the unfolding of God's love and justice to the whole of creation through the good news of Jesus. This love and justice of God triumphs in the **Eschaton** as God rids the earth of pain, oppression, disease and death and renews his creation as his own dwelling place. God makes everything new again. It is creation restored but also glorified, and the story continues into eternity.

The Script?

This **theo-drama** concept was first introduced to me when I read a book that *Christianity Today* called the best book in theology in 2006. The book was called *The Drama of Doctrine* and was written by Kevin Vanhooser.

Basically Vanhooser explains that doctrine – which simply means teaching – is direction for us as individuals and the church collectively so that we may participate in this **theo-drama** (Divine Drama or story of God). The story is basic. It is God's actions in reconciling humanity to himself. Theology is our faith seeking to understand that drama or story. Understanding that story is not enough for when we understand it; we will necessarily preform it. Scripture is the script that forms and transforms the people of God.

- What is the script for our participation in the theo-drama?
- Does this mean that Scripture provides a script for living in the 21st century?
- In what sense is Scripture a script for us today?

10

The Reading of Scripture

“The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us and Christians have been trying to make Him word again ever since” (Anonymous).

“So I have suggested that Scripture is something very different than a blueprint for you and I. Yet, Scripture remains a pattern – a theological pattern. If it is not a blueprint then what do we make of it? Scripture speaks of itself as, “It’s alive, for the word of God is effective and is beyond any sharp sword piercing until it divides the life from the spirit and the joint from the marrow” (Hebrews 4:12).

What I think the Hebrew writer is communicating to us is the truth that Scripture is much more than a blueprint. It is alive. Scripture is not just a dusty old story on a printed page. It is a drama that, once encountered, invites you and I to continue the story all the way to the end – the **eschaton**. A problem with forcing Scripture into the mold of blueprint is that it forces it back into print. One person said it this way, “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us and Christians have been trying to make Him word again ever since.”

No, Scripture is alive. I translated the Hebrews 4:12 passage above in a much more literal fashion for that is how the Hebrew writer begins. **ALIVE!!** Is how he begins his sentence. Scripture is a story that informs but also invites. You and I have a choice to participate or stand by and watch. Too often, I believe we have tried to stand by and analyze what is going on and then act it out in just the same way rather than becoming like Jesus...the Word who became **FLESH**.

It’s rather like the artist who re-creates on of the masters as opposed to the new talent who takes the risk to express the story his or her own way. One cannot reproduce Rembrandt’s *Return of the Prodigal* but you can witness his brilliance and learn from his experience. What Rembrandt paints comes from his soul. His painting is part of his story; his experience. When one attempts a reproduction it is a sort of plagiarism. It’s not a genuine expression of artistic expression. The copycat artist is not living the painting. He is merely reproducing it. Those are not the same.

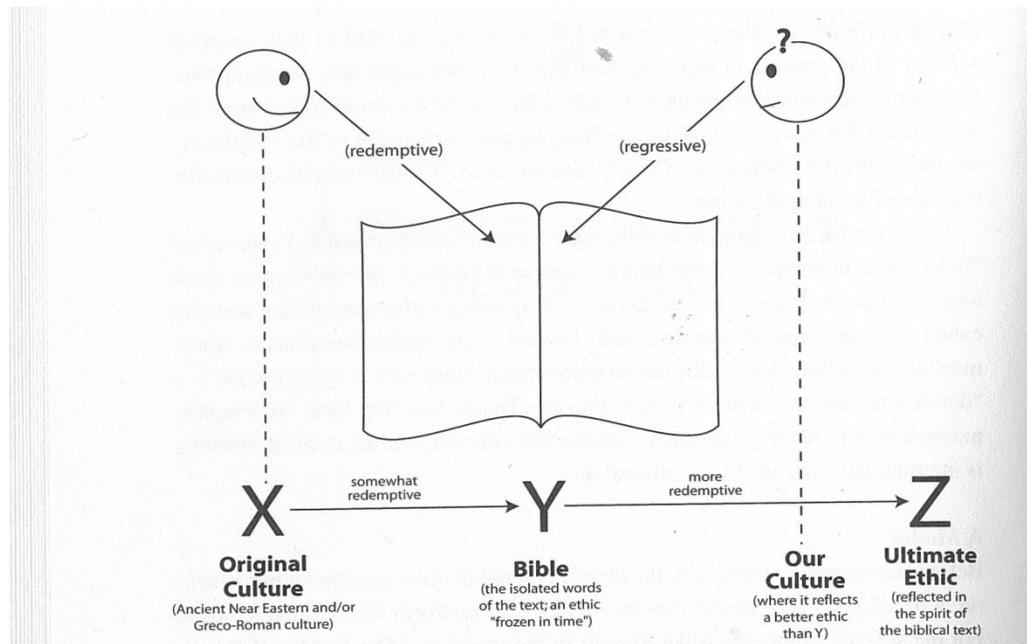


Illustration from: Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis page 32, William J. Webb, Intersarsity Press, 2001.

The illustration above provided by Webb explains this concern. We certainly would not want to replicate conditions of the first century for women or slaves in our current culture. It would be absurd to do so, yet restoring the pattern of the first century in full would suggest doing so or at the least defending the right of another to do so. A problem is that not even the first century church did this very thing. They too were a church on the move – a church continuing to evolve to a more Christ-like position.

Example:

In Acts 15 we have the Council at Jerusalem. Most historians place the timing of this event around 50 A.D. At this point in Christian history most of the followers of Jesus were of Jewish descent. However, tensions began to rise when the good news was taken to the Gentiles – not because the Gentiles received the gospel but because they did not first convert to Judaism. The meeting recorded in Acts 15 discusses this concern.

Sometime after this event recorded in Acts, the Apostle Paul pens his letter to Rome. Scholars date the book of Romans sometime after the death of the Emperor Claudius which occurred in 54 A.D. Note that this is at the very least four years after the Council at Jerusalem.

- Read what James, the brother of Jesus, concludes in Acts 15:19-20. How does he “judge” on this occasion? What does he direct should happen regarding food sacrificed to idols?

- Read Romans 14 and notice verses 3, 6, 15-16, 19-20. What does Paul “judge” on this occasion? What does he direct should happen regarding food sacrificed to idols?
- Which historical pattern should one replicate? At what moment in the first century should we freeze time in order to reproduce a historical pattern?
- If one reads this pattern theologically, what might we consider? Will my pattern be the same as yours or an individual living in India today if we examine it from a theological perspective?

Reading The Story; Living The Story

I suggest that Scripture as a story continues today. Because Scripture is Alive in you and I as believers in the center of the story – Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection – we practically apply it here and now. We don’t replicate Scripture. We live it.

Scripture is progressive. It is goal oriented. When you and I watch the movement of the drama of Scripture toward the goal through the various movements of God’s redemptive history it is very instructive. It provides critical insight into the continuity and discontinuity of the biblical story (e.g., between Old Testament and New Testament) and it highlights the grand arching story or **metanarrative**. Following is a method for reading Scripture with our eyes open to this redemptive-historical movement within the drama.

Reading Redemptively

Step 1: What Does The Text Say: Exegesis.

Contextualized Significance: What did the text call them to do?

Contextualized Meaning: Why did the text call for this behavior?

Step 2: Normative Substance of the Text: Theology.

Theological Substance: What theological substance inheres within the text’s meaning?

Redemptive-History: How is this substance reflected within the drama?

Theological Center: How does it relate with the theological centers of the drama?

Step 3: Application of Meaning to Modern Audience: Homiletics.

Recontextualized Meaning: How does this substance translate into contemporary culture?

Recontextualized Significance: What does the theology of the text call us to do?

Example Text: 1 Timothy 2:9-10. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

Step 1: What Does the Text Say: Exegesis.

Contextualized Significance: What did the text call them to do? Women should dress with “decency and propriety” which means they should not wear clothing that is ostentatious or reflects their noble status. The context is probably a worship assembly, or at least, the lifestyle of the Christian community.

Contextualized Meaning: Why did the text call for this behavior? Women ought to give evidence of their piety (*θεοσέβειαν*) through good works rather than through their social standing.

Step 2: Normative Substance of the Text: Theology.

Theological Substance: What theological substance inheres within the text’s meaning? The substance is humility/service as the proper evidence of one’s piety.

Redemptive-History: How is this substance reflected within the drama? The problem is not expensive clothing or attention to beauty, but the attitude which divides people according to class and social status. The principles of redemptive-history reflect the union of God’s people in humility rather than along the lines of social standing (cf. Amos 4:1-3; 6:1-7). Arrogance translates into social injustice and luxurious lifestyles (Ezek. 16:49-50; James 5:5).

Theological Center: How does it relate to the theological centers of the drama? Fear of God and humility are paired in Scripture (cf. Prov. 15:33; 22:4). Humility versus pride is a dominant theme in Scripture (Prov. 3:34; 11:1; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). The basic attitude of worship is humility (Is. 66:2; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6). It is the recognition that we are creatures rather than the Creator, and as creatures we share the task of imaging God in the world. We see in Jesus himself the display of humility and service rather than pride and luxury.

Step 3: Application of Meaning to Modern Audience: Homiletics.

Meaning Recontextualized: How does this substance translate into contemporary culture? The Christian lifestyle must be a humble one (shall we say “simple” one?), and in the context of the worship gathering humble dress is demanded. Issues of economic lifestyle and modest dress are culturally relative. The theological substance, however, rejects pride and extravagance among God’s people.

Significance Recontextualized: What does the theology of the text call us to do? It calls us to dress and live humbly in whatever cultural setting in which we find ourselves. What does this mean for American churches and Christians? Anyone dare go there in their leadership within a church? Can we really hear the call of this text in our own setting? Dare we obey it?

This is a fairly simple illustration, though it is not without questions itself. For example, is the theological principle really about humility/service where the problem was the flamboyant dress of women in Ephesus or is the problem more about seductive dress (the accessories of prostitutes)? Perhaps we don't have to choose since either flows from the fundamental notion of "modesty."

More importantly, this text illustrates that our modern applications do not always reproduce the Pauline application. Paul's application excluded gold and braided hair from godly female dress, but we certainly don't exclude such today (e.g., wedding rings). I don't think this is a problem. Rather, it reflects the point that what we apply to the modern believer is not the text itself ("don't wear gold") but what we apply is the theological substance of the text (e.g., modesty, humility, service). The applications may vary according to circumstances, cultures and time, but the substance remains the same. And the substance remains the same because it is rooted in the theological reality of God himself revealed within in the drama.

What's the Point?

Isn't this what we have always done? Is not everyone following the same hermeneutical method?

Actually, no. For my purpose, the significant difference between the traditional **Stone-Campbell** hermeneutic and what I have proposed above is the substance of the second step. While the traditional hermeneutic basically construes the second step as a legal maneuver or a **regulative** mandate in order to discern legal authority through a legal hermeneutical lens. I suggest we see the second step with a dramatic lens. In other words, instead of seeking "legal authority," we are seeking how to participate in the drama in ways that embody the divine intent and goal.

In essence, I am suggesting **metanarrative** theology is the substance of the second step rather than constitutional law. The theological hermeneutic is to discern the character and mission of God through the drama as it culminates in the Christ Event. This discernment, then, enables us to recontextualize that theological substance for our contemporary world.

Theories of Revelation and Inspiration



This discussion of how one reads the Bible begs some questions that will not be discussed at any length in this study. These questions relate to the nature of revelation and inspiration of Scripture. Just how did God accomplish this? Appendix B includes a chart created by Norman Geisler

in his book, A General Introduction to the Bible. Geisler outlines eight views of inspiration.

- Does the Bible contain errors in the sense of scientific or historical error? Or is the Bible inerrant?
- Is the Bible all sufficient in the sense of matters of faith and practice? Is the Bible infallible?
- Could the Bible be one (i.e. infallible) without the other (i.e. inerrant)?
- When reading from a construction pattern would there must be no error or the building will collapse. Would this also be true of a theological pattern?

The Authority of Scripture

“The Bible alone is the only authority that can bind the conscience of a person absolutely because it is the only authority that carries with it the intrinsic authority of God himself” (R.C. Sproul, The Divine Foundation of Authority)

“D on’t we need authority for what we believe and practice in the kingdom of God? One might suggest, “All this ‘theological pattern’ stuff just leaves the door wide open to do anything you want to do.” This is a legitimate question when one understands Scripture to be the infallible word of God.

It seems that Jesus was concerned about that very question when he raised it with his inquisitors regarding the baptism of John. “By what authority” seems to be a legitimate question (Matthew 23:23-27). Perhaps someone might quibble with my use of that text—I understand that, but I will leave the larger question to the side for the moment. I will simply assume, for my present purposes, that disciples of Jesus need “authority” for what they believe and practice in the kingdom of God.

Questioning the authority of Scripture is a sensitive subject for conservative Christians since it is usually associated with a practice called **textual criticism**. **Textual criticism** has been associated with many scholars who deny the Divine authority of Scripture. For me, it is not a matter of whether Scripture has authority; it is a question about how one understands the nature of authority.

Limiting myself to the historic position among Churches of Christ on “biblical authority,” I want to discuss this point in the light of two variant approaches.

Nature of Biblical Authority

One answer might be something like this. What disciples need for authority in the kingdom of God is **positive law**. In other words, to search out the rules and regulations which govern the church as if New Testament documents intended to fully set out a pattern for the church in terms of assembly, organization, etc. These rules, for

example, are specific and exclude those things not specifically mentioned. The specific of bread and wine, for example, excludes any other food in addition to the bread and wine. The specific of singing excludes any addition to the singing (including humming, playing or handclapping, etc.). The specific of first day of the week Lord's Supper excludes any other day.

What is assumed is that each of these texts intend to be specific exclusionary commands. This is a process for discerning **positive law**, and it assumes a constitutional literary model, legal **hermeneutics**, isolation of texts from contexts in order to place them in a legal frame, and the Calvinistic **regulative principle** among other things.

Another answer might be something like this. What disciples need for authority in the kingdom of God is an organic connection or relationship with the gospel. Jesus is the authority in the kingdom of God. The meaning and significance of his life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension are the authority for disciples of Jesus. Whatever we do in the kingdom of God must be rooted, connected to and organically grow out of the life of Jesus, our pattern. It is fundamentally the imitation of Jesus, but more broadly the imitation of God, who is revealed in Jesus and through redemptive history.

The problem with **positive law** is that we don't have any instruction within the New Testament that fits the **genre** of a legal code in the New Testament. The Gospel is the core message of the New Testament and the theological reality which is the **hermeneutical** lens for Paul (as an example).

Authority derives climatically from the mighty act of God in Jesus whose significance has been lived out in Israel previously and the church subsequently. Authority in the kingdom of God is not about legal propositions but authentic revelation of the heart of God in Jesus.

But how does this work? Those within Churches of Christ are quite familiar with how **positive law** functions within a paradigm of command, example and inference that assumes a legal pattern for the church within the New Testament. But authority derived from the act of God in Jesus does not resonate well with those trained in the legal **hermeneutic** of **positive law**. Consequently, I will briefly illustrate what I mean by this.

Authority of the Gospel

The practice and meaning of those things that are so readily identified with the Restoration Movement (baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the assembly) are derived from the Gospel rather than a **positive law**.

- **Baptism.** Disciples follow Jesus into the water. They commit themselves, as Jesus did, to the ministry of the kingdom through their baptism. They are declared children of God at their baptism. They are gifted with the Holy Spirit to minister at their baptism. Jesus is the model of baptism; his baptism is the

first Christian baptism. As disciples of Jesus, we commit ourselves to the way of the cross through baptism just as he did.

- Israel anticipated this purification act through their own water rituals and the early church continued the water ritual of baptism as initiation into the community, participation in the gospel, and anticipation of the **eschaton**.
- **Lord's Supper.** Disciples follow Jesus to the table. They continue the table ministry of Jesus through the breaking of bread—eating with sinners and saints, Pharisees and prostitutes. At the table, Jesus breaks the bread, communes with us, and we enjoy the fellowship of the kingdom. But the table is characterized by kingdom etiquette—it welcomes the poor, the oppressed, the wealthy, sick, etc. At the table we sit as servants together in the kingdom of God and declare the gospel in word and deed.
 - Israel anticipated this table fellowship through the thanksgiving (fellowship) offerings of the Levitical system which was a daily event in Israel and part of every festival. The early church continued breaking bread with Jesus and each other, both daily and every first day of the week. The practice of the table was declaration of the gospel, a participation in the gospel, and an anticipation of the **eschaton**.
- **Assembly.** Disciples follow Jesus into the gathering of God's people. Jesus assembled with the people of God to declare the praise of God, and he calls us to gather together in his name to pray. He is present with us, joins in our chorus of praise to the Father, and by the presence of the Spirit transforms us into his image.
 - Israel anticipated the assembly of God's people with Jesus through their own assemblies in the presence of God (Leviticus 23) as their festivals were sacred moments of encounter between God and his people. The early church continued the practice of assembling for prayer as well as mutual encouragement, but it was not simply for encouragement but also to meet with Jesus and enter the Holy of Holies as a community. Assembling is a witness of the gospel, a participation in the gospel, and an anticipation of the **eschaton**.

Thus, disciples seek “authority” in the life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus rather than in prescriptive rules and regulations that are embedded in a legal constitution. We seek authority in the story of God among his people so that we might participate in that story, imitate the life of God in that story, and become the image of God in the world rather than finding a pattern (which we have to construct because it is not explicitly there) in order to build our congregations like Moses built the tabernacle.

I know that there are many other hermeneutical issues to consider. I have made a feeble, fallible and flawed attempt to think through some of the issues of hermeneutical method. I hope it is beneficial to some and at least food for thought to all.

Think About It

It has been said that Churches of Christ have three sacraments: Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the Lord's Day or assembly. This is a significant aspect of the **Stone-Campbell Movement**. Thomas Campbell linked these three together. "Here, then," he wrote, "are the three grand comprehensive positive, ordinances of the gospel; namely, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Lord's Day, all designed to keep the blissful subject of our present and eternal salvation, in its causes, effects, and consequences, before our minds: and one day every week publicly set apart for those joyful purposes." (*An Address to All our Christian Bretheren, Upon the Necessity and Importance of the Actual Enjoyment of our Holy Religion, Millennial Harbinger*, May 1844, p. 202).

- What is the difference between regulating a worship gathering based on the principle of the Gospel and regulating worship based on **positive law**?
- Why does the New Testament not contain equivalent of the Old Testament book of Leviticus?
- What is the basic problem that arises in the effort to regulate a worship gathering by Scripture?

12

Conclusion: 3 Easy Steps

“The primary purpose of reading the Bible is not to know the Bible but to know God” (James Merritt, Former President of the Southern Baptist Convention).

“**T**hat is who we are. We like a process – a checklist. It’s easy for us to believe that if we just work the right steps in the right order, we’re guaranteed to achieve the right outcome. That’s why so much literature on biblical interpretation focuses on methodology.

Many of us believe that if we simply identify the right process for reading the Bible-do the right steps in the right order-we’ll eliminate the opportunity for misinterpretation. Unfortunately, methodologies are the products of culture. And as I’ve noted throughout this book, our cultural values and assumptions are very often the problems. So if you hope this concluding chapter will include three easy steps for becoming a more sensitive reader of Scripture, you are going to be disappointed. There are no shortcuts in the process. If you are thirty years old, then you’ve been developing habits of thinking and reading for thirty years. It’s unreasonable to expect to reverse those habits by reading a single book or bearing a few principles in mind. Change takes time, self-reflection and hard work. So instead of a checklist, I want to offer some advice.

EMBRACE COMPLEXITY

It may be tempting to think that tricky biblical passages can be easily explained by appealing to cultural differences. But remember that this is one book and I’ve not begun to touch on all the complicated matters that exist. In many Bible accounts, several different things may go without being said that will affect our interpretation.

Take the story of the three wise men in the accounts of Jesus’ birth for example. In Jesus’ day, several things went without being said. First, people assumed stars know things that mere humans don’t. Today we understand that stars don’t know anything.

Additionally, it goes without being said for us that God sent the star to the magi – which the text does not say. For the Jewish audience, God forbade seeking guidance from the stars. But we typically ignore this point when we tell the story; it doesn't fit our values. Third, many assume that since there are three gifts, there must have been three wise men. Our cultural **mores** dictate that everybody at the party brings a gift. But this is unlikely. In Jesus' day, three men traveling with treasure would have been robbed. Finally, since we misunderstand how God is involved, we assume the wise men's journey must have been a good thing. After all, God works all things together for good. Therefore, we turn the event into a positive children's story, even though the outcome was that it nearly got Jesus killed, and it did indeed get a lot of innocent babies killed. In other words, be prepared to embrace complexity. We may import several presuppositions into any given text. Sorting them out will take some work. Expect it.

BEWARE OF OVERCORRECTION

A few years ago I encountered a new field called **open theology**. I was attracted to the notion that God might not micromanage my worldly affairs, predetermining where I went to college, whom I married, what I did for a living and so on. I quickly swung from believing that God charted my every step in life to believing God didn't really care what decisions I made, as long as I made good ones. Classic overcorrection. And if you're reading this right now just know that I am not an open theist. I'm just a plain old Arminian. We have a tendency to overcorrect. We're all-or-nothing sort of people. For this reason, once we've identified an interpretation, application or doctrine as "cultural," it's tempting to abandon it altogether. If, for example, you once had a tendency to assume every promise in the Bible applies to you directly, you might be tempted to overcorrect and assume that none of the promises in the Bible apply directly to you. Resist the temptation. What the psalmist announced was true:

⁴You are my King and my God,
 who decrees victories for Jacob.
⁵Through you we push back our enemies;
 through your name we trample our foes.
⁶I put no trust in my bow,
 my sword does not bring me victory;
⁷but you give us victory over our enemies,
 you put our adversaries to shame.

But it is equally true that sometimes God does not give us victory over our enemies. For the very same psalm asserts: "But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies" (Ps 44:9). Becoming a sensitive kind of reader means allowing for nuance and resisting the tendency to make all-or-nothing overcorrections. Let us always trust in the faithfulness of God to keep his promises. But let us not, in

the process, take away God's right to judge a person, group or generation. We should not insist that God's promises to "his people" must always include every individual, especially me.

BE TEACHABLE

One thing I hoped to bring to your attention in this book is how often Christians assume a position on an issue based on our worldview and then defend it with great passion as if it were the clear teaching of the Bible. For instance, money management is an important skill to survive in middle-class America. But it is not one of the Ten Commandments. We think, Of course, God wants everyone to save for the future. Yet Third World Christian fishermen don't save. The fish would spoil if you tried to save some for tomorrow. (Interestingly enough so did the manna in the wilderness; see Ex 16:4, 19-20.) After all, Jesus told those who worried about tomorrow to consider the lilies of the field (Mt 6:28). While I don't want you to overcorrect – Jesus didn't command all his disciples to sell everything they have and give the money to the poor – I want you to be teachable; open to having your presuppositions changed so they conform more closely to the pattern, Jesus. My hope is that we'll all be transformed 'into [Jesus'] image with ever-increasing glory' (2 Cor 3:18). That process requires that we be willing to abandon our old assumptions.

EMBRACE ERROR

Whether we like it or not, we learn more when we get something wrong the first time than we do when we are right from the beginning. This is true of most endeavors, including interpreting Scripture. People from a **Restoration Movement** background are serious about the Bible; we recognize there is a lot at stake in interpretation. How many of us have been frightened by James' warning: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jas 3:1 NIV)? So I'm not asking you to take the responsibility of biblical interpretation less seriously. But, I encourage you to allow yourself the space to make mistakes and learn from them.

What do I mean? Our hope is not in exacting doctrinal correctness and a perfect understanding of Scripture. Our hope is in the life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus. So, take a risk. Explore new things. Read about **open theism**, for example. I found it attractive and wanted to know more. As I did, I found that it only sharpened my conviction that I was not an open theist and what I had believed all along is where I remain. But, challenge long held beliefs and be willing to let go of them if they do not hold muster. Our fear of being "in error" of violating the pattern has isolated us and stunted our growth in more than one instance.

What is a not so emotional example of this principle? Efficiency is considered a primary “good” in the North American worldview. When we demonstrate that a process or policy is more efficient than another, we don’t have to make any other arguments of support. Consistent with this value, in Western theology all spiritual beings (outside of God) are reduced to one kind: angels. Thus demons, evil spirits, unclean spirits, cherubs and seraphs are all commonly presumed to be angels, just good or bad (fallen) ones. Very efficient! We ignore the fact that the Bible describes them quite differently: cherubs are ridden (Ps 18:10), seraphs have wings (Is 6:2), fallen angels are locked away (2 Pet 2:4) while evil spirits wander about (Lk 11:24). Instead, we interpret the terms evil spirits, demons and unclean spirits as mere synonyms, although it would be hard to make a case for this from Scripture. Don’t be afraid of being wrong. Fear only failing to learn from your mistakes.

READ TOGETHER

So how do we best avoid misreading Scripture? How do we remove our cultural blinders? I believe that being aware of a misreading is half the battle. Misreadings occur for different reasons. We are likely misreading when our reading of the text requires us to ignore the context, to shorten the text to just this or that verse or part of a verse. We are likely misreading when our reading of the text requires us to lengthen the text, by pulling in verses from other parts of the Bible (i.e. **proof texting**) until we assemble all the pieces we need.

Other times, though, we misread because we read alone. That is, we often hear only the interpretations of people just like us. If we want to know when we’re reading ourselves into the Bible, rather than allowing the Bible to speak in its own terms, we need to commit ourselves to reading together. Paying attention to our brothers and sisters abroad can open the echo chamber and allow new voices in. As for me, reading across the ages has been very helpful. I went back and read the original sources. What were men like Alexander Campbell thinking? When I read his thoughts it’s like reading together.

There is danger in allowing a homogenous group of white, middle-class Americans to decide together what Scripture means. They are liable to interpret Philippians 4:13 as God’s promise that they will be able to afford the next generation cell phone. The same danger lurks when a white, middle-class American seminary trains the next generation of preachers.

May we seek to read Scripture with “persons from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). As we do so, we need to remember that all people everywhere have their own cultural blinders. Christians in the United States tend to praise Asian

Christians for their emphasis on community, for example. “Those Korean Christians really understand biblical community.” Well, perhaps they do. But, that may not be because they are more spiritually in tune. Instead their culture predisposes them to think of the group before the individual. Similarly, I have read Korean Christians applauding American Christians for generosity and forgiveness. Americans are quick to forgive. Most U.S. Christians aren’t still angry at Japan over Pearl Harbor and this may make it easier for them to actualize Jesus’ commands to forgive. An Asian emphasis on community is just as much an accident of language and culture as our emphasis on individuality.

All of us read some parts faithfully and misread other parts. Because of our different worldviews, we often misread different parts. And that’s why we need each other. Because whether we are “Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free,” we do not study the Scriptures only for ourselves. We study the Scriptures, to paraphrase Paul, so that the “word of Christ [may] dwell in you richly as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom" (Col 3:11, 16).

Glossary

Analogy – an analogy or analogous speech allows for certain comparisons between two things providing clarity on the nature of the things compared. Example: Blood vessels are like highways.

Baconianism – is a scientific investigative method developed by Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and expounded upon in his book, *Novum Organum* (Latin for New Instrument). Bacon is the father of the scientific method. Distilling his thoughts in a glossary note are difficult but he essentially sought to strip the investigative process of cultural, personal, economic and authority bias. Through **inductive reason**, one can discern objective facts that can in turn provide a standard or law about that observation.

Barton W. Stone – (1772-1844) was a Presbyterian Pastor expelled from the Presbyterian Church for his belief in faith as the sole prerequisite for salvation. In 1832 Stone's "Christian Movement" united with Alexander Campbell's "Reformed Baptist" movement into what was later called the Restoration Movement and is also referred to as the **Stone-Campbell Movement**. The groups united as a testimony to their opposition to denominationalism and called for believers to unite solely under the banner of Jesus Christ. An interesting note about Stone is that he did not believe in the orthodox or traditional view of the Trinity.

Bethany College – founded in 1840 in what is now West Virginia, the college was chartered in Virginia before the Civil War by **Alexander Campbell**. It was originally a seminary for training ministers that first met in Campbell's home and was first called Buffalo Seminary (chartered in 1818).

Campbell, Alexander – (1788-1866) was an early leader in a larger movement known as the Second Great Awakening. He was the son of **Thomas Campbell**, also an important reformer in church history. Campbell was born in Scotland and received his theological education at the University of Glasgow before being ordained as a Presbyterian minister. He came to the United States at the age of 21 and became a fiery church reformer ultimately breaking with the Presbyterians and later the Baptist association preferring to be a "Christian only" and have "no creed but the Bible."

Campbell, Thomas – (1763-1854) was a Presbyterian minister important in the Second Great Awakening of the United States. Born in County Down, Northern Ireland, he began a religious reform movement on the American frontier. He was joined in the work by his son **Alexander Campbell**. Their movement merged in 1832 with the similar movement led by **Barton W. Stone** to form what is now described as the American Restoration Movement (also known as the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement).

Chiasmus – from the Greek letter *chi* which corresponds to our letter “x”. It is a figure of speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through a reversal of structures in order to make a larger point.

Cultural Relativism – A philosophical term used in human studies to explain that our surroundings are not absolute. It would suggest that instead all things are relative...all things are without an absolute concrete understanding.

Deaver, Roy – (1922-2007) was a preacher in Churches of Christ for many years as well as an influential writer, particularly in the area of Biblical authority. He penned several books and wrote for publications such as the *Gospel Advocate* and the *Spiritual Sword*.

Ecclesiology – is a theological term that deals with questions about the origin of the church, the relationship of the church to Jesus, its role in salvation, leadership, and discipline.

Empirical – originating or based upon observation or experience; reliance upon experience alone without regard for system and theory.

Equivocal – open to more than one interpretation; ambiguous

Eschatology – a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or with humankind. It is a discussion of the end of all things but it is also an initiation of the new because the “end” is meant as a sense of the completion of all things. It is as much a beginning as an end.

Exegesis – the act of explaining a Bible text so that one may discover the author’s meaning and how his original audience might have understood those words.

Genre – a French word brought into English meaning kind or sort. The Greek equivalent is *genos* from which we get our word Genus. In the discussion of Bible interpretation one is speaking about the different kinds of literature found within the Scriptures....letters, apocalyptic writings, Gospels, historical accounts, poetry, etc...

Hardeman, N. B. – (1874-1965) was an educator, debater and gospel preacher within the Church of Christ. Hardeman, along with Avery G. Freed, co-founded the National Teachers Normal and Business College (NTN&BC) in Henderson, Tennessee in 1907. The college would later be renamed Freed-Hardeman College in 1919 and then Freed-Hardeman University in 1990. He would serve 25 years as President of Freed-Hardeman (1925-1950).

Hermeneutic – the term originates with the Greek god Hermes who served as the messenger to Olympus. So the use of the term has to do with sacred messages. Biblical Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation of scripture.

Historical-Grammatical Criticism – is a hermeneutical method that seeks to discover the Biblical author’s intended meaning in the text. This seeks to distinguish between the one original intended meaning of the text and its significance today.

Homiletics – the art of application of the Scripture to life circumstances. Specifically this term is often used of preaching because it meant to produce a response on the part of the hearer.

Inductive reason – a form of reasoning that makes generalizations based upon observation of individual instances. While the inductive theory does form a basis of support for the conclusion it does not ensure it. By example: All instances involving baptism in the Gospels, Acts, and Paul’s letters mention adults. Therefore adults are the proper candidate for baptism. However, there are mentions of entire households being baptized (Acts 16:33) so some might assume that children could be involved in this process.

Keeble, Marshall – (1878-1968) was an African-American preacher of the Churches of Christ, whose successful career notably bridged a racial divide in an important American religious movement prior to the American Civil Rights Movement.

Ketcherside, Carl – (1908-1989) was an ardent defender of **pattern theology** and well known preacher in Churches of Christ until the 1950’s when he experienced a radical shift in his thinking after visiting Ahoey, Ireland, the boyhood home of Alexander Campbell. He despaired of what he called the “sectarian spirit” that had enveloped the Churches of Christ. He began investigating the original writings of **Alexander Campbell** and other early **Restoration Movement** leaders. As he returned to the Scripture, Ketcherside found an entirely different approach to the Christian life, work and worship. He then became a strong advocate for change in Churches of Christ and unity among all who claimed belief in Jesus as Christ.

Lamar, J. S. – (1828-1908) was a student of **Alexander Campbell** at **Bethany College** in West Virginia. He was a very influential teacher and writer in the Restoration Movement. Lamar grew up in Georgia but traveled a broad circuit and was instrumental in bringing the teachings of Stone and Campbell to the Wiregrass area in Southeast Alabama.

Lipscomb, David – (1831-1917) was a minister, editor and educator in the **Restoration Movement**. He was a co-founder of Nashville Bible College which later became known as Lipscomb University. Lipscomb was a de facto leader in Churches of Christ during the time of the division between congregations over the issue of instrumental music.

Metanarrative – a narrative above a narrative. A story embedded in a story.

Miller, Dave – (1953 – present) is currently the head of Apologetics Press (AP), an organization originally founded as a defender of creation science. Today, AP is primarily involved in producing materials defending the Biblical interpretation principles of **pattern theology** first expounded upon by **J. S. Lamar**.

Mores – the accepted traditional customs of a particular social group; moral attitudes, manners and ways.

Normative Principle – is a doctrine that teaches that worship in the church can include things that are not prohibited by Scripture. It is also broadened to include matters of **ecclesiology** and **soteriology**. This principle is often contrasted with the **Regulative Principle**.

North, Ira – (1922-1984) was the well known minister for the Madison Church of Christ in Nashville, TN. For 32 years he served the church that became the largest congregation among Churches of Christ in the world. He was a bridge builder between young and old, rich and poor. A favorite saying of Dr. North was, “Let everybody have his say and nobody have his way all the time.”

Open Theology – Practically, open theism makes the case for a personal God who is open to influence through the prayers, decisions, and actions of people. Although many specific outcomes of the future are unknowable, God's foreknowledge of the future includes that which is determined as time progresses often in light of free decisions that have been made and what has been sociologically determined. So God knows everything that has been determined as well as what has not yet been determined but remains open. As such, God is able to anticipate the future, yet remains fluid to respond and react to prayer and decisions made either contrary or advantageous to God's plan or presuppositions.

Pattern Theology – a **proof-texting** theology based on Hebrews 8:5 that suggest the New Testament writings beginning with Acts and going through Revelation contain an exacting pattern for Christians to follow regarding the name of the church, its organization, the nature of its work and how we should worship. Discovery of this pattern and its implementation is the goal. Depending upon how strictly one adheres to this pattern, some would go as far as to say those who do not discover and follow the pattern will be eternally condemned to Hell.

Populist – a philosophy urging social and / or political change that favors “the people” over “the elites”.

Positive Law – is a term that applies to laws specifically enacted by government or in this case God as a means to properly govern and organize society. It is to be differentiated from natural law which is a function of reason.

Practical Theology – is the everyday application of God’s teachings to life situations. Insightful followers of Jesus should ask, “What is going on? Why? What ought to be taking place? How should I respond?” These questions reflect how one analyzes a situation, interprets it, normalizes it and comes up with a pragmatic solution.

Proof-texting – is the utilization of a verse or short passage from the Bible as a way of “proving” a particular doctrinal belief. However, since verses and texts may rely extensively on the context in which they appear for correct interpretation, pulling these out of their context and having them stand alone in “proof” can be very misleading. Further, a set of proof texts can completely ignore other passages, if added to the mix, which may lend a completely different interpretation. Doctrinal positions established entirely upon proof texts can lead people in a very different direction than the original intent and context in which that verse might be found.

Organon – a philosophy term coined by Aristotle meaning a system of logic or scientific investigation.

Pericope – it is a Greek word (περικοπή) which literally means “a cutting out.” It is a set of verses that forms one coherent unit of thought suitable for public reading.

Regulative Principle – is a teaching first suggested by Calvinists and Anabaptists during the Reformation Movement in the 1600’s. It is primarily concerned with how the Bible orders public worship. The substance of this teaching is that God institutes in the Scriptures everything He requires for worship in the church and that everything else is prohibited. It is less frequently broadened to apply to other areas such as **ecclesiology** and **soteriology**. It is often contrasted with what is known as the **Normative Principle**.

Restoration Movement – see **Stone-Campbell Movement**.

Rice Jr., Ira Y. – (1917-2001) was a well known minister in the Churches of Christ and was editor of the journal *Contending for the Faith*. Rice also wrote several books including his most famous *Axe on the Root* (3 volumes).

Schism – a split or division between strongly opposed sections or parties caused by differences of opinions or beliefs.

Sola Scriptura – Latin for “by scripture alone” is the doctrine that the Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness. Consequently, *sola scriptura* demands only those doctrines are to be admitted or confessed that are found directly within or indirectly by using valid logical deduction or valid deductive reasoning from scripture. However, *sola scriptura* is not a denial of other authorities governing Christian life and devotion. Rather, it

simply demands that all other authorities are subordinate to, and are to be corrected by, the written word of God. *Sola scriptura* was a foundational doctrinal principle of the Protestant Reformation held by the Reformers and is a formal principle of Protestantism today.

Soteriology – is a theological term regarding the study of how salvation is attained.

Stone-Campbell Movement – **Alexander Campbell** and **Barton W. Stone** were co-founders of what is also known as the **Restoration Movement**. Campbell was the son of a Presbyterian minister from Ireland. He settled at Bethany, West Virginia. He taught that a rational study of the biblical text revealed the essential facts of primitive Christian faith and advocated Christian union on the basis of New Testament teaching. Campbell left the Presbyterians, holding that creeds should not be made tests of fellowship. In 1812 Campbell joined the Baptists but later separated from them. Campbell initiated a revival on the Western Reserve and in 1832 his movement was united with Barton Stone's Christian Connection in Kentucky. By the mid-19th century it was one of the largest American denominations. (from the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*)

Textual Criticism – is a branch of study concerned with the identification and removal of transcription errors in ancient texts. This practice is accomplished by comparing old manuscripts with one another to identify the best possible edition. This field of study has also called into question the authorship of various documents based upon literary issues within them. Though the field has been embraced by most conservative Christians, it has not been without controversy since many scholars who practice this method have denied the infallibility of God's word. Interestingly, the practice of textual criticism has served to strengthen the claims made by conservative Christians regarding the integrity of Scripture. It should also be noted that other religious writings like the Q'uran, the Talmud, and the Book of Mormon have not been subjected to the rigorous examination that the Bible has received. Followers of Islam have strongly rejected the practice with threats of violence and Latter Day Saints have controlled most of the studies of their own historical text.

Theodrama – I became familiar with this term when reading *The Drama of Doctrine*, a book by Kevin Vanhooser who is a Professor at Wheaton College. In short, his work proposes that good theology is faith seeking an understanding of this theodrama (story of God). But, it does not stop with understanding the text; we must perform it; we perform Scripture. Scripture, according to Vanhooser, is the “script that forms and transforms the people of God.”

Thomas, J.D. – (1910-2004) was the former chair of the Bible Department at Abilene Christian University. Thomas was a respected author and teacher. He

wrote a number of works on Biblical interpretation that reflect the mainstream views of many Churches of Christ.

Univocal – having only one possible meaning; unambiguous

Vestments – garments and articles normally associated with Christian practice. Most frequently one thinks of the wearing of clerical robes or other sorts of clothing.

Wallace, Jr., Foy E. – (1896-1979) was an influential figure among American Churches of Christ in the early to middle 20th century. Through his writing and speaking, Wallace gathered a considerable following among this autonomous group of churches; his combination of the skilled use of logic combined with charisma propelled him to the forefront of several major controversies regarding the interpretation of Scripture within Churches of Christ. These included: pre-millennialism, pacifism, race relations, and the institutional controversy.

Appendix A: The Lunenburg Letters

Following is the full text of the exchange between Alexander Campbell and a “conscientious sister” from the town of Lunenburg introduced by two brief paragraphs of commentary. It includes several discussions over a period that began in June 1837 when Campbell noted that “we find in all Protestant parties Christians”.

This letter and Alexander Campbell’s comments or remarks have affected the thinking of many, both within and without the Restoration Movement, since first appearing in the *Millennial Harbinger* for 1837.

The statement by Campbell that induced the lady from Lunenburg to write the editor of the *Harbinger* is in an article entitled “Letters to England-No. 1,” which was published in the June, 1837, issue. So that it may be kept in context, we give the entire paragraph preceding the statement and the paragraph in which the statement is found. The statement to which objection was raised is printed in bold capital letters so as to be easily identifiable.

“Touching your inquires on some matters, I hasten to observe,—that our brethren generally regard the church as the only moral or religious association which they can lawfully patronize. Hence they form not Missionary, Education, Tract, Bible, Temperance, Anti-Slavery confederations. If these are good works, they belong to the church in her own proper character; and every member of the church is, as a Christian, obliged to promote these objects as far as he has the means and the opportunity.

The Christian institution, in our judgment, demands of all its subjects their best efforts to put down all profanity, unrighteousness, injustice, oppression, and cruelty in the world; and to promote every benevolent, humane, and charitable object which can ameliorate the conditions of human existence. That the gospel ought to be preached; that evangelists or missionaries ought to be sent out and sustained by the church; that the whole community should be intellectually and morally educated—every child born upon our soil so trained as to be a useful, safe and honorable member of society; that the Bible always, and sometimes religious tracts, newspapers, magazines and pamphlets should be widely circulated in the world; that Christians should be temperate in all things, and especially so in the use of all intoxicating liquors, and perhaps sometimes wholly abstinent; that they should not, after communing at the Lord’s table, unite in any secret, political, or moral combination with the Lord’s enemies, Turks, Jews, or Atheists; that they should oppose all schemes of robbery and oppression, whether the victims be white, black, or yellow—bond servant or hired servant; that Christians should render to their servants everything that is just and equal; that they should not, even when the laws permit them, violate or cause others to violate God’s most ancient, venerable, and holy institution of marriage, by selling a wife from her husband, or infants from the embraces of maternal and paternal affection; that they should treat every human being, without regard to political or other factitious and circumstantial distinctions and differences, as their fellow-creatures, as subjects of God’s philanthropy, to be taught his religion, and trained for immortality, are propositions or tenets held by us sacred as the precepts of Christ.

We would, indeed, have no objections to co-operate in these matters with all Christians, and raise contributions for all such purposes as, in our judgment, are promotive of the Divine glory or of human happiness, whether or not they belong to our churches: **FOR WE FIND IN ALL PROTESTANT PARITES CHRISTIANS** as exemplary as

ourselves according to their and our relative knowledge and opportunities; but we cannot form a confederacy with the troops of Satan, or tax his subjects to sustain the Christian cause; and, therefore, so long as all these associations openly and avowedly form a community on any one of these bonds of union, irrespective of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven; I say, so long as they hold communion with profane and ungodly persons, or with Gentiles of no creed and every creed, because of a single point of coincidence, whatever that point may be, we cannot unite with them, or sail under such a flag. Besides, if such schemes are really necessary, then has the church failed—then the Divine institution must yield the palm to institutions merely human. (pp. 271-273)

ANY CHRISTIANS AMONG PROTESTANT PARITES

Lunenburg, July 8th, 1837.

“Dear brother Campbell—I WAS much surprised to-day, while reading the Harbinger, to see that you recognize the Protestant parties as Christian. You say, you ‘find in all Protestant parties Christians.’

“Dear brother, my surprize and ardent desire to do what is right, prompt me to write to you at this time. I feel well assured, from the estimate you place on the female character, that you will attend to my feeble questions in search of knowledge.

Will you be so good as to let me know how any one becomes a Christians? What act of yours gave you the name of Christian? At what time had Paul the name of Christ called on him? At what time did Cornelius have Christ named on him? Is it not through this name we obtain eternal life? Does the name of Christ or Christian belong to any but those who believe the gospel, repent, and are buried by baptism into the death of Christ?”

In reply to this conscientious sister, I observe, that if there be no Christians in the Protestant sects, there are certainly none among the Romanists, none among the Jews, Turks, Pagans; and therefore no Christians in the world except ourselves, or such of us as keep, or strive to keep, all the commandments of Jesus. Therefore, for many centuries there has been no church of Christ, no Christians in the world; and the promises concerning the everlasting kingdom of Messiah have failed, and the gates of hell have prevailed against his church! This cannot be; and therefore there are Christians among the sects.

But who is a Christian? I answer, Every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will. A perfect man in Christ, or a perfect Christian, is one thing; and “a babe in Christ,” a stripling in the faith, or an imperfect Christian, is another. The New Testament recognizes both the perfect man and the imperfect man in Christ. The former, indeed, implies the latter. Paul commands the imperfect Christians to “be perfect,” (2 Cor. iii. 11.) and says he wishes the perfection of Christians. “And this also we wish” for you saints in Corinth, “even your perfection:” and again he says, “We speak wisdom among the perfect,” (1 Cor. ii. 6.) and he commands them to be “perfect in understanding,” (1 Cor. xiv. 20.) and in many other places implies or speaks the same things. Now there is perfection of will, of temper, and of behaviors. There is a perfect state and a perfect character. And hence it is possible for Christians to

be imperfect in some respects without an absolute forfeiture of the Christian state and character. Paul speaks of “carnal” Christians, of “weak” and “strong” Christians; and the Lord Jesus admits that some of the good and honest-hearted bring forth only thirty fold, while others bring forth sixty, and some a hundred fold increase of the fruits of righteousness.

But everyone is wont to condemn others in that in which he is more intelligent than they; while, on the other hand, he is condemned for his Pharisaism or his immodesty and rash judgments of others, by those that excel in the things in which he is deficient. I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion in to the name of the father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and well-grounded hope of heaven. “Salvation was of the Jews,” acknowledged the Messiah; and yet he said of a foreigner, an alien from the commonwealth of Israel, a Syro-Phenician, “I have not found so great faith—no, not in Israel.”

Should I find a Pedobaptist more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immerse on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. Did I act otherwise, I would be a pure sectarian, a Pharisee among Christians. Still I will be asked, How do I know that any one loves my Master but by his obedience to his commandments? I answer, In no other way. But mark, I do not substitute obedience to one commandment, for universal or even for general obedience. And should I see a sectarian Baptist or Pedobaptist more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisitions of the Messiah, than one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation and love as a Christian. So I judge, and so I feel. It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves; and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.

With me mistakes of the understanding and errors of the affections are not to be confounded. They are as distant as the poles. An angel may mistake the meaning of a commandment, but he will obey it in the sense in which he understands it. John Bunyan and John Newton were very different persons, and had very different views of baptism, and of some other things; yet they were both disposed to obey, and to the extent of their knowledge did obey the Lord in everything.

There are mistakes with, and without depravity. There are wilful errors which all the world must condemn, and unavoidable mistakes which everyone will pity. The Apostles mistook the Saviour when he said concerning John, “What if I will that John tarry till I come;” but the Jews perverted his words when they alleged that Abraham had died, in proof that he spake falsely when he said, “If a man keep my word he shall never see death.”

Many a good man has been mistaken. Mistakes are to be regarded as culpable and as declarative of a corrupt heart only when they proceed from a wilful neglect of the means of knowing what is commanded. Ignorance is always a crime when it is voluntary; and innocent when it is involuntary. Now, unless I could prove that all who neglect the

positive institutions of Christ and have substituted for them something else of human authority, do it knowingly, or, if not knowingly, are voluntarily ignorant of what is written, I could not, I dare say that their mistakes are such as unchristianize all their professions.

True, indeed, that it is always a misfortune to be ignorant of anything in the Bible, and very generally it is criminal. But how many are there who cannot read; and of those who can read, how many are so deficient in education; and of those educated, how many are ruled by the authority of those whom they regard as superiors in knowledge and piety, that they never can escape out of the dust and smoke of their own chimney, where they happened to be born and educated! These all suffer many privations and many perplexities, from which the more intelligent are exempt.

The preachers of “essentials,” as well as the preachers of “nonessentials,” frequently err. The Essentialist may disparage the heart, while the Non-essentialist despises the institution. The latter makes void the institutions of Heaven, while the former appreciates not the mental bias on which God looketh most. My correspondent may belong to a class who think that we detract from the authority and value of an institution the moment we admit the bare possibility of any one being saved without it. But we choose rather to associate with those who think that they do not undervalue either seeing or hearing, but affirming that neither of them, nor both of them together, are essential to life. I would not sell one of my eyes for all the gold on earth; yet I could live without it.

There is no occasion, then, for making immersion, on a profession of faith, absolutely essential to a Christian—though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort. My right hand and my right eye are greatly essential to my usefulness and happiness, but not to my life; and as I could not be a perfect man without them, so I cannot be a perfect Christian without a right understanding and a cordial reception of immersion in its true and scriptural meaning and design. But he that thence infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision.

I do not formally answer all queries proposed knowing the one point to which they all aim. To that point only I direct these remarks. And while I would unhesitatingly say that I think that every man who despises any ordinance of Christ or who willing ignorant of it, cannot be a Christian; still I should sin against my own convictions, should I teach anyone to think that if he mistook the meaning of any institution while in his soul he desired to know the whole will of God he must perish forever. But to conclude for the present—he that claims for himself a license to neglect the least of all the commandments of Jesus because it is possible for some to be saved who through insuperable ignorance or involuntary mistake, do neglect or transgress it; or he that wilfully neglects to ascertain the will of the Lord to the whole extent of his means and opportunities because some who are defective in that knowledge may be Christians, is not possessed of the spirit of Christ and cannot be registered among the Lord’s people. So I reason; and I think in so reasoning I am sustained by all the Prophets and Apostles of both Testaments.

A.C.

CHRISTIANS AMONG THE SECTS

In an article on a query from Lunenburg which appeared in the September number, certain sentences have been objected to by some two or three intelligent and much esteemed correspondents. We gave it as our opinion that there were Christians among the Protestant sects; an opinion, indeed, which we have always expressed when called upon. If I mistake not, it is distinctly avowed in our first Extra on Remission; yet it is not supposed by these brethren that I have conceded a point of which I have hitherto been tenacious and that I have misapplied certain portions of scripture in supporting said opinion. In the article alluded to, we have said that we “cannot make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even Christian immersion,” &c. Again, we have said that “there is no occasion for making immersion on a profession of faith absolutely essential to a Christian, though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort.” These two sentences contain the pith and marrow of the objectionable portion of said article to which we again refer the reader.

Much depends upon the known temper and views of a querist in shaping an answer to his questions. This was the case in this instance. We apprehended that the propounder of the queries that called for these remarks was rather an ultraist on the subject of Christian baptism; so far at least as not to allow that the name Christian is at all applicable to one unimmersed, or even to one immersed, without the true intent and meaning of baptism in his understanding previous to his burial in water. This we gathered from her epistle; and of course gave as bold an answer as we ever gave—perhaps more bold than on any former occasion, yet nothing differing from our former expressed views on that subject.

My high regard for these correspondents, however, calls for a few remarks on those sentences, as farther explanatory of our views. We cheerfully agree with them, as well as with our sister of Lunenburg, that the term Christian was given first to immersed believers and to none else; but we do not think that it was given to them because they were immersed, but because they had put on Christ; and therefore we presume to opine, that, like every other word in universal language, even this term may be used as Paul sometimes uses the words saint and sinner, Jew and Gentile—in part of their signification.

We have, in Paul’s style, the inward and outward Jews; and may we not have the inward and the outward Christian? For true it is, that he is not always a Christian who is one outwardly: and one of my correspondents will say, ‘Neither is he a Christian who is one inwardly.’ But all agree that he is, in the full sense of the word, a Christian who is one inwardly and outwardly.

As the same Apostle reasons on circumcision, so we would reason on baptism:-- “Circumcision,” says the learned Apostle, “is not that which is outward in the flesh;” that is, as we apprehend the Apostle, it is not that which is outward in the flesh; but “circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter [only,] whose praise is of God, and not of man.” So is baptism. It is not outward in the flesh only but in the spirit also. We argue for the outward and the inward—the outward for men, including ourselves—the inward for God; but both the outward and the inward for the praise both of God and of men.

Now the nice point of opinion on which some brethren differ is this: Can a person who simply, not perversely, mistakes the outward baptism, have the inward? We all agree that

he who willfully or negligently perverts the outward cannot have the inward. But can he who, through a simple mistake, involving no perversity of mind, has misapprehended the outward baptism, yet submitting to it according to his view of it, have the inward baptism which changes his state and has praise of God, though not of all men? is the precise opinion. To which I answer, that, in my opinion, it is possible. Farther than this I do not affirm.

My reasons for this opinion are various; two of which we have only time and space to offer at this time. Of seven difficulties it is the least; two of these seven, which, on a contrary hypothesis would occur, are insuperable:--The promises concerning an everlasting Christian church have failed; and then it would follow that not a few of the brightest names on earth of the last three hundred years should have to be regarded as subjects of the kingdom of Satan!!!

None of our brethren regard baptism as only outward. They all believe that in the outward submersion of the body in the water, there is at the same time the inward submersion of the mind and heart into Christ. They do moreover suppose that the former may be without the latter. They have only to add that it is possible for the latter to be not without the former in some sense, but without it in the sense which Christ ordained.

Still my opinion is no rule of action to my brethren, nor would I offer it unsolicited to any man. But while we inculcate faith, repentance, and baptism upon all, as essential to their constitutional citizenship in the Messiah's kingdom, and to their sanctification and comfort as Christians, no person has a right to demand our opinions on all the differences of this generation, except for his private gratification. He is certainly safer who obeys from the heart "that mould of doctrine" delivered to us by the Apostles; and he only has praise of God and man, and of himself as a Christian, who believes, repents, is baptized, and keeps all the ordinances, positive and moral, as delivered to us by the holy Apostles.

The scriptures quoted in the essay are complained of, are all applied to the Christian character, and not to the Christian state, as contemplated by one of our correspondents. They are therefore not misapplied. It is hoped these general remarks will be satisfactory on this point.

A.C.

Ohio River, Sept. 28th, 1837.

ANY CHRISTIANS AMONG THE SECTS?

JUDGING from numerous letters received at this office, my reply to the sister from Lunenburg has given some pain to our brethren, and some pleasure to our sectarian friends. The builders up of the parties tauntingly say to our brethren, "Then we are as safe as you," and "You are coming over to us, having now conceded the greatest of all points—viz. that immersion is not essential to a Christian." Some of our brethren seem to think that we have neutralized much that has been said on the importance of baptism for remission, and disarmed them of much of their artillery against the ignorance, error, and indifference of the times upon the whole subject of Christian duty and Christian privilege.

My views of Opinionism forbid me to dogmatize or to labor to establish my own opinion, and therefore I hope to be excused for not publishing a hundred letters for and against said opinion. Only one point of importance would be gained by publishing such a correspondence; and I almost regret that we have not a volume to spare for it. It would indeed fully open the eyes of the community to the fact that there are but few “Campbellites” in the country. Too many of my correspondents, however, seem to me to have written rather to show that they are not “Campbellites,” than to show that my opinion is false and unfounded.

While, then, I have no wish to dogmatize, and feel to obligation to contend for the opinion itself, I judge myself in duty bound to attempt—

- 1st. To defend myself from the charge of inconsistency.
- 2nd. To defend the opinion from the sectarian application of it.
- 3rd. To offer some reasons for delivering such an opinion at this time.

I. With all despatch, then, I hasten to show that I have neither conceded nor surrendered anything for which I ever contended; but that on the contrary, the opinion now expressed, whether true or false, is one that I have always avowed. (Footnote in original reads: It is with us as old as baptism for the remission of sins, and this is at least as old as the “Christian Baptist.” Read the first two numbers of that work.)

1. Let me ask, in the first place, what could mean all that we have written upon the union of Christians on apostolic grounds, had we taught that all Christians in the world were already united in our own community?

2. And in the second place, why should we so often have quoted and applied to apostate Christendom what the Spirit saith to saints in Babylon—“Come out of her, my people, that you partake not of her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues”—had we imagined that the Lord had no people beyond the pale of our communion!

3. But let him that yet doubts, read the following passages from the Christian Baptist, April, 1825:--“I have no idea of seeing, nor wish to see, the sects unite in one grand army. This would be dangerous to our liberties and laws. For this the Saviour did not pray. It is only the disciples dispersed among them that reason and benevolence would call out of them,” &c. &c. This looks very like our present opinion of Christians among the sects!!! 2d ed. Bethany, p. 85.

4. Again, speaking of purity of speech in order to the union of Christians, we say, “None of you [Christians] have ever yet attempted to show how Christians can be united on your principles. You have often showed how they may be divided, and how each party may hold its own, but while you pray for the visible unity of the disciples, and advocate their visible disunity, we cannot understand you.” March 1827, vol. 4.

5. Various essays and letters on “Christian union” from our correspondents, are given to our readers with our approbation; from one of which we quote these words:--“I suppose all agree that among Christians of every name there are disciples of Jesus Christ, accepted of God in him, real members of his body, branches in the true vine, and therefore all one in Christ.” October, 1826, vol. 4, p. 53.

6. In a letter to Spencer Clack, August, 1826, I have said, “As to what you say concerning the evils of division among Christians, I have nothing to object. I sincerely deplore every division, and every sectarian feeling which now exists; and if I thought there was any man on this continent who would go farther than I to heal all divisions and to unite all Christians on constitutional grounds, I would travel on foot a hundred miles to see him and confess my faults to him.” vol. 5, p. 15.

7. On the evening before my departure to debate with Mr. Owen, vol. 6, p. 239, April 6, 1829, in alluding to that crisis, I say—“I rejoice to know and feel that I have the good wishes, the prayers, and the hopes of myriads of Christians in all denominations.” So speak the pages of the Christian Baptist on many occasions. (Original footnote states: “Let the curious reader consult the essays on Christian Union in the Christian Baptist, so far as I have approbated them, especially my replies to an Independent Baptist.”)

8. The views of the Millennial Harbinger on this subject are condensed in a work called “Christianity Restored,” or, as we have designated it, “A Connected View of the Principles,” &c. “of the Foundation on which all Christians may form one communion.” (See its title-page!!)

9. In that volume there is a long article on the foundation of Christian union, showing how the Christians among the sects may be united. We refer to the whole of this article from page 101 to 128, as the most unequivocal proof of our views of Christians among the sects. Indeed we say (page 102) of our own community, that it is a nucleus around which may one day congregate all the children of God. In that article we wax bolder and bolder, and ask, (page 121,) “Will sects every cease? Will a time ever come when all disciples will unite under one Lord, in one faith, in one immersion? Will divisions ever be healed? Will strife ever cease among the saints on earth?”

10. But in the last place in the first **Extra on Baptism for Remission of Sins**, we exclude from the pale of Christianity of the Pedobaptists, none but such of them as “wilfully neglect this salvation, and who, having the opportunity to be immersed for the remissions of sins, wilfully neglect or refuse”—“of such,” indeed, but of none others, we say, “We have as little hope for them as they have for all who refuse salvation on their own terms of the gospel.” 1st Extra, 1st ed. p. 53.

With these ten evidences or arguments, I now put it to the candor of those who accuse us of inconsistency or change of views, whether they have not most evidently misrepresented us. Were it necessary we could easily swell these ten into a hundred.

II. We shall now attempt to defend this opinion from the sectarian application of it:--

1. It affords them too much joy for the consolation which it brings; because it imparts no certainty of pardon or salvation to any particular unbaptized person whatsoever.

In reference to this opinion, all the unimmersed are to be ranged in two classes;--those who neither know nor care for this opinion, and those who know it and rejoice in it. It will require but a moment’s reflection to perceive that those who care nothing for this opinion will not rejoice it nor abuse it; and that those who would, for their own sake, rejoice in it are not included in it. He that rejoices in such an opinion, for his own sake,

has had the subject under consideration; and it is a thousand chances to one that he is obstinately or willingly in error on the subject; and, therefore, in the very terms of the opinion, he is precluded from any interest in it. His joy, indeed, is strong presumptive evidence against him; because it is proof that he is one sided in his feelings, which no upright mind can be—at least such a mind as is contemplated in the opinion; for it respects only those who have not had any debate with themselves upon the subject, and have, without any examination or leaning, supposed themselves to have been baptized.

In no case, indeed, can there be the same certainty (all things else being equal) that he who was sprinkled, poured, or immersed on some other person's faith; or that he who was sprinkled, or poured on his own faith, shall be saved, as there is that he that first believes and is then, on his own confession, immersed, shall be saved. In the former case, at best, we have only the fallible inference or opinion of man; while in the latter we have the sure and unerring promise of our Saviour and Judge. It cannot be too emphatically stated that he that rejoices for his own sake, that he may be accepted by the Lord on his infant or adult pouring or sprinkling, because of his dislike to, or prejudice against believer's immersion, gives unequivocal evidence of the want of state of mind which is contemplated in the opinion expressed; and has proved himself to be a seeker of his own will and pleasure, rather than rejoicing in the will and pleasure of God; and for such persons we can have no favorable opinion.

2. But that the aforesaid opinion does not disarm us of our arguments against ignorance, error and indifference, is evident; because it assumes that the person in question is acting up to the full measure of his knowledge upon the subject, and that he has not been negligent, according to his opportunities, to ascertain the will of his Master; for in the very terms of the opinion he is not justified, but self-condemned, who only doubts, or is not fully persuaded that his baptism is apostolic and divine.

3. To admit that there may be Christians among the sects, does not derogate from the value or importance of baptism for the remission of sins, any more than it derogates from the superior value and excellency of the Christian Institution to admit that salvation was possible to the Jews and Patriarchs without the knowledge and experience of all the developments of the New Testament. For besides the Christian disposition, state and character, there are the Christian privileges. Now, in our judgment, there is not on a earth a person who can have as full an assurance of justification or of remission of sins, as the person who has believed, confessed his faith, and been intelligently buried and raised with the Lord; and therefore the present salvation never can be so fully enjoyed, all things else being equal, by the unimmersed as by the immersed.

4. Again, as every sect agrees, that a person immersed on a confession of his faith is truly baptized, and only a part of Christendom admits the possibility of any other action as baptism: for the sake of union among Christians, it may be easily shown to the duty of all believers to be immersed, if for no other reason that that of honoring the divine institution and opening a way for the union and co-operation of all Christians. Besides, immersion gives a constitutional right of citizenship in the universal kingdom of Jesus; whereas with our opponents, themselves being judges, their "baptism" gives the rights of citizenship only in some provinces of that kingdom. For as far as baptism is concerned, the Greek, the Roman, the English, the Lutheran, the Calvinian, the Arminian, the Baptist communities will receive the immersed; while only a part of Christendom will

acknowledge the sprinkled or the poured. Therefore, our opinion militates not against the value of baptism in any sense.

5. In the last place, to be satisfied with anything that will just do in religion, is neither the Christian disposition nor character; and not to desire to know and do the whole will of God, places the individual out of the latitude and longitude of the opinion which we have advanced. These things being so, then we ask, wherein does the avowal of such an opinion disarm us of arguments for professor or profane, on the value of the baptism in the Christian Institution; or the importance and necessity of separating one's self from all that will not keep the commandments of Jesus; and of submitting without delay to the requisitions of the illustrious Prophet whom the Almighty Father has commanded all men to obey?

III. In the third and last place, we offer some reasons for delivering such an opinion at this time:--

1. We were solicited by a sister to explain a saying quoted from the current volume of this work, concerning finding "Christians in all Protestant parties." She proposed a list of questions, involving, as she supposed, either insuperable difficulties or strong objections to that saying; and because she well knew what answers I would have given to all her queries, I answered them not: but attended to the difficulty which I imagined she felt in the aforesaid saying.

2. But we had still more urgent reasons than the difficulties of this sister to express such an opinion:--Some of our brethren were too much addicted to denouncing the sects and representing them en masse as wholly aliens from the possibility of salvation—as wholly antichristian and corrupt. Now as the Lord says of Babylon, "Come out of her, my people," I felt constrained to rebuke them over the shoulders of this inquisitive lady. These very zealous brethren gave countenance to the popular clamor that we make baptism a saviour, or a passport to heaven, disparaging all the private and social virtues of the professing public. Now as they were propounding their opinions to others, I intended to bring them to the proper medium by propounding an opinion to them in terms as strong and as pungent as their own.

The case is this: When I see a person who would die for Christ whose brotherly kindness, sympathy, and active benevolence know no bounds but his circumstances; whose seat in the Christian assembly is never empty; whose inward piety and devotion are attested by punctual obedience to every known duty; whose family is educated in the fear of the Lord; whose constant companion is the Bible: I say, when I see such a one ranked among the heathen men and publicans, because he never happened to inquire, but always took it for granted that he had been scripturally baptized; and that, too, by one greatly destitute for all these public and private virtues, whose chief or exclusive recommendation is that he has been immersed, and that he holds a scriptural theory of the gospel: I feel no disposition to flatter such a one; but rather to disabuse him or his error. And while I would not lead the most excellent professor in any sect to disparage the least of all the commandments of Jesus, I would say to my immersed brother as Paul said to his Jewish brother who gloried in a system which he did not adorn: "Sir, will not his uncircumcision, or unbaptism, be counted to him for baptism? and will he not condemn you, who, though having the literal and true baptism, yet dost transgress or neglect the statutes of your King?"

3. we have a third reason: We have been always accused of aspiring to build up and head a party, while in truth we have always been forced to occupy the ground on which we now stand. I have for one or two years past labored to annul this impression, which I know is more secretly and generally bandied about than one in a hundred of our brethren may suspect. On this account I consented the more readily to defend Protestantism; and I have, in ways more than I shall now state, endeavored to show the Protestant public that it is with the greatest reluctance we are compelled to stand aloof from them—that they are the cause of this great “schism,” as they call it, and not we.

Now, with this exposition in mind, let us examine the meaning of the alleged concession. And first let me ask, What could induce us to make it at this crisis? or, I should more correctly say, to repeat it so strongly?

No one will say our opponents have compelled us by force of argument to make it. Themselves being judges, we have lost nothing in argument. All agree that the “concession” was uncalled for—a perfect free-will offering.

Neither can they say that we envy their standing, or would wish to occupy their ground; because, to say nothing of our having the pure original gospel institutions among us, regarding us merely as a new sect like themselves, we have no reason to wish to be with them, inasmuch as we have the best proselyting system in Christendom. Faith, repentance, and baptism for the remission of sins, with all the promises of the Christian adoption and the heavenly calling to those who thus put on Christ, is incomparably in advance of the sectarian altar and the straw—the mourning bench, the anxious seat, and all the other paraphernalia of modern proselytism. That it is so practically, as well as theoretically, appears from the fact of its unprecedented advances upon the most discerning and devout portions of the Protestant parties. No existing party in this or the father-lands has so steadily and rapidly advanced as that now advocating the religion of the New Testament. It has been successfully plead within a few years in almost every state and territory in this great confederacy, and even in foreign countries.

All agree, for a thousand experiments prove it, that all that is wanting is a competent number of intelligent and consistent proclaimers, to its general, if not universal triumph, over all opposing systems. We have lost much, indeed, by the folly, hypocrisy, and wickedness of many pretenders, and by the imprudence and precipitancy of some good brethren: yet from year to year it bears up and advances with increasing prosperity, as the present season very satisfactorily attests.

Do we, then, seek to make and lead a large exclusive sect or party? Have we not the means! Why then concede anything—even the bare possibility of salvation in any other party, if actuated by such fleshly and selfish considerations? With all these facts and reasonings fresh in our view, I ask, Is not such a concession—such a free-will offering, at such a time, the most satisfactory and unanswerable refutation that could be given to the calumny that we seek the glory of building a new sect in religion? If, then, as some of our opponents say, we have made a new and an unexpected concession in their favor, we have done it at such a time, in such circumstances, and with such prospects before us, as ought (we think) henceforth to silence their imputations and reproaches on the ground of selfish or partisan views and feelings.

Some of our fellow-laborers seem to forget that approaches are more in the spirit and style of the Saviour, than reproaches. We have proved to our entire satisfaction, that having obtained a favorable hearing, a conciliatory, meek, and benevolent attitude is not only the most comely and Christian-like, but the most successful. Many of the Protestant teachers and their communities are much better disposed to us than formerly, and I calculate the day is not far distant when many of them will unite with us. They must certainly come over to us whenever they come to the Bible alone. Baptists and Pedobaptists are daily feeling more and more the need of reform, and our views are certainly imbuing the public mind more and more every year.

But to conclude, our brethren of Eastern Virginia have been the occasion at least of eliciting at this time so strong an expression of our opinion; and we have now many letters from that region for one from any other quarter on the aforesaid opinion. Had not some of them greatly and unreasonably abused the sects, or countenanced, aided, and abetted them that did so, and had not a few in some other regions made Christianity to turn more upon immersion than upon universal holiness, in all probability I would have answered the sister from Lunenburg in the following manner and style:--

The name Christian is now current in four significations:--

1. The ancient primitive and apostolic import simply indicates followers of Christ. With a strict regard to its original and scriptural meaning, my favorite and oft repeated definition is, A Christian is one that habitually believes all that Christ says, and habitually does all that he bids him.

2. But its national and very popular sense implies no more than a professor of Christianity. Thus we have the Christian nations, as well as the Pagan and Mahometan nations; the Christian sects as well as the sects political and philosophical.

3. But as soon as controversies arose about the ways and means of putting on Christ or making a profession of his religion, in a new and special or appropriated sense, "a Christian" means one who first believes that Jesus is the Christ, repents of his sins, is then immersed on confession into Christ's death, and thenceforth continues in the Christian faith and practice.

4. But there yet remains the sense in which I used the term in the obnoxious phrase first quoted by our sister of Lunenburg. As in the judgment of many, some make the profession right and live wrong; while others make the profession wrong, but live right; so they have adopted this style—"I don't know what he believes, nor how he was baptized, but I know he is a Christian." Thus Adam Clarke quotes some poet:

"You different sects who all declare,
"Lo! Christ is here, and Christ is there!
"Your stronger proofs divinely give,
"And show me where the Christians live!"

Now in this acceptation of the word, I think there are many, in most Protestant parties, whose errors and mistakes I hope the Lord will forgive; and although they should not

enter into all the blessings of the kingdom on earth, I do fondly expect they may participate in the resurrection of the just.

The words Jew, Israel, circumcision, disciple, are used in the same manner, even in the sacred writings: “They are not all Israel that are Israel”—“An Israelite indeed”—“The true circumcision”—“A Jew inwardly and outwardly”—“Then are you my disciples indeed,” &c.

I am glad to see our brethren so jealous of a correct style—so discriminating, and so independent. They are fast approaching the habit of calling Bible things by Bible names. They only misunderstood me as using the term in its strictest biblical import, while in the case before us I used it in its best modern acceptance.

I could as easily at first as at last have given this reply to our sister’s queries- but I thought the times required something else—and I was not mistaken. I have no doubt but it will yet appear to all that I have pursued in this the more useful and salutary course.

Our Eastern brethren were indeed, I opine, hasty and precipitate enough in expressing themselves—almost indeed before they had time to hear and consider the whole matter. I wish they had been as prompt on another occasion, and I should not have been addressed on this subject by the worthy sister so often named. But we are all learning and progressing towards perfection. If any of them, and not all, wish their communications to appear in this work, accompanied with a few pertinent remarks, I am in duty bound, according to my plan, to publish some of them.

I do not indeed blame them altogether for being prompt; for I had rather be an hour too soon as half an hour too late; yet I think some resolutions which I have received, were, upon the whole, rather premature. May the Lord bless all the holy brethren, and give them understanding in all things.

A.C.

Appendix B: Theories of Inspiration

View	Name	Proponents	Revelation	Errors in Originals?	Errors in Copies?	Means of Inspiration	Degree of Authority of Bible
Mechanical Dictation	Hyper-Fundamentalism	Muslims Spiritists Some Hyper-Fundamentalists	In Words (Individually)	None	None	By Dictation	Infallible and Inerrant
Verbal Dictation	Fundamentalism	John R. Rice	In Words (Individually)	None	Few	By Supernatural Molding of Writer's Style	Infallible and Inerrant
Verbal Inspiration	Fundamentalism Evangelicalism	B.B. Warfield F. Schaeffer	In Words (Holistically)*	None	Few	Supernatural Process	Infallible and Inerrant
Conceptual Inspiration	Neo-Evangelicalism	A.H. Strong D. Beegle J. Rogers	In Concepts (Not Words)	None theologically (or morally) Some factually	Few	Revealed Ideas Writer's Own Words	Infallible Not Inerrant
Instrumental Revelation	Liberal Evangelicalism	C.S. Lewis	Through Words (Not <i>in</i> Words)	Some (In both areas)	Some	Writer's Words "Elevated" by God	Authoritative Not Inerrant
Personal Revelation	Neo-Orthodoxy	Karl Barth Emil Brunner John Baillie	In Acts, Events (Not Words)	Some (In both areas)	Many	Revealed Acts Writer's Record	Usually Reliable Not Inerrant
Illuminationism	Liberalism	Harold DeWolf Harry E. Fosdick	By Illumination (No Revelation)	Many (In both areas)	Many	Divine Actualization of Natural Powers	Often Reliable Not Inerrant
Intuitionism	Process Theology	Shubert Ogden	By Intuition (No Revelation)	Many (In both areas)	Largely	Purely Natural Powers	Sometimes Reliable Not Inerrant [*]

^{*} Geisler, N. L., & Nix, W. E. (1986). *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Rev. and expanded.) (190). Chicago: Moody Press.

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- ^s Translation from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, in which the scriptures were originally written, is also a form of interpretation. Instead of relying solely on the English versions I am providing my own translations of verses included in this study guide. I acknowledge that I am not a linguistics scholar but do have experience in both languages and have several Hebrew and Greek texts and dictionaries available for reference.
- ² Henry Cloud and John Townsend's book "How People Grow" is a favorite of mine and begins with a discussion about how we have turned our relationship with God upside down. While it is not a book about interpretation, it does provide a helpful framework regarding our spiritual growth. Good biblical interpretation must begin with a healthy understanding of my dependence upon my creator. Oswald Chambers put it well, "Faith is not intelligent understanding; faith is a deliberate commitment to a Person." A deliberate pursuit of relationship makes me passionate to know my Creator's desires for me all the more. Good interpretation must begin with a good relationship. There is no substitute.
- ^a Charles Hodge (1797-1878) is an esteemed Reformed theologian. He came to very different conclusions about how to interpret God's Word in his well known book *Systematic Theology*. However, his chapter headings included titles such as: "Inductive Method as Applied to Theology," "Facts to be Collected," and "The Theologian to be Guided by the Same Rules as the Man of Science".
- ¹ Dr. Dallas Burdette (www.freedominchrist.net), a prolific writer and teacher in Churches of Christ, once identified to me that there were 26 distinct groups that meet today that claim the Restoration Movement as their home. This is quite an impressive number of groups to have formed from a movement that began as a unity movement.
- ² Page 414 of *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* details the use of instrumental music in worship assemblies very early in the movement in the 1850's. Most churches did not employ the use of instruments but they generally did not bind their beliefs on other churches or make the use of instruments a test of fellowship.
- ¹ Mark Driscoll, pastor of the Mars Hill Church in Seattle, discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the regulative principle in one of his sermons which was accessed online at <http://marshill.com/media/religionsaves/regulative-principle>.
- ¹ Many people who disagreed with the movement toward a Historical-Grammatical reading of the text of Scripture pejoratively charged the "change agents" within Churches of Christ with offering a "New Hermeneutic". One of the more prominent agents of change was Dr. Rubel Shelley, a well-known preacher and debater. An equally well-known representative of those who adamantly defended the regulative principle would be Judge Alan E. Highers who has edited the journal *The Spiritual Sword*.