



GRACE
COMMUNION

INTERNATIONAL

Living and Sharing the Gospel

Scripture, God's Gift

by Gary Deddo

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CHAPTER ONE – GOD’S GIFT

The Christian church down through the ages has always regarded the Bible as indispensable for its worship, devotion and life. Its very existence is bound up with it. The church would not be what it is without it. Holy Scripture is part of the air it breathes and the food it eats.

I learned of the importance of the Bible as a young child and was encouraged and taught to read it and memorize it. I studied it both on my own and with others—I’m glad I did, now years later. The study of the Bible has always been an essential part of my ministry in serving others whether it was teaching it, preaching from it, studying it with small groups of other Christians, or referring to it when counseling others. When I attended seminary my primary focus was the study and interpretation of Scripture. It was so important to me that I was willing to try to learn Hebrew and Greek to see if I could understand Scripture better!

Along the way, I learned that there were various ways the nature and place of Scripture was understood and various ways to make use of it. Some of these seemed better than others, while some seemed to lead to the misuse of Scripture, or even to making it irrelevant. I read books and took courses to sort out these issues hoping I could find some wisdom in all this not only to help me, but to pass on to others.

Scripture is so essential to the Christian faith that most denominations have an official statement concerning the importance and place of Scripture. GCI is no exception. These summaries can be a good place to start reflection on the nature, purpose and right use of Scripture. GCI’s statement is brief, to the point and fairly comprehensive:

The Holy Scriptures are by God’s grace sanctified to serve as his inspired Word and faithful witness to Jesus Christ and the gospel. They are the fully reliable record of God’s revelation to humanity culminating in his self-revelation in the incarnate Son. As such, Holy Scripture is foundational to the church and infallible in all matters of faith and salvation.

Let’s explore what’s behind this theological summary of our understanding of Scripture. We do so not so we can enter into endless debate or prove ourselves superior to other Christians who might have a different view. And I don’t think we simply want a theory about it. We

seek understanding of Scripture because we highly value it and want to honor and make proper use of it. We want to handle it well so we can get the most out of it. And these very things Holy Scripture itself encourages us to do. We also can recall that others in church history have benefited greatly through a deep understanding of Scripture and how to interpret it. But in the end, I think we want to grasp and use it well because we hope to get to know even better the God of the Bible in whom we put our faith.

By God's Grace

Many of us have sung the childhood song that says: "Jesus loves me, this I know—for the Bible tells me so." And that's true enough. However there's a different way to sing that verse that is also true: "Jesus loves me this I know—so the Bible tells me so!" This second way is reflected in the GCI statement that the Bible is God's gift to us, a gift of grace and so of his love. Because God loves us in and through Christ, he has graciously provided us his written Word.

God didn't have to do so, but his love for us, his creatures, has moved him to provide us with his Word in written form. God's love for us comes first, then follows his provision of the Bible. We wouldn't really be able to know and love God if God hadn't first loved us and communicated to us through his written Word. God gives us his word in Scripture because he loves us and wants us to know that he does. We should always remember that the Bible is God's gracious gift of love to us.

God Continues to Empower His Word

But that's not the end of it. Human words in and of themselves don't have the capacity to reveal to us the truth and reality of God. Human words are just that, human. They derive primarily from our human experiences. But God is not a creature and can't be simply grasped in creaturely terms, concepts and ideas. Words, when referring to God, don't mean exactly the same thing as when they refer to creation. So we can say we "love" and we can say God "loves." But God's love far exceeds our love. We use the same word, but we don't mean the same thing when we use it of God compared to when we use it of ourselves. Yet our love can be a dim mirror image of God's love. So God himself has to sanctify, make holy and adequate, our mere human words so we can use them to accurately and faithfully refer to the God of the Bible and not lead us into misunderstandings of God and his ways.

The God of the Bible is active and continually gracious to us by superintending our reading and interpretation of Scripture, helping us to see how they uniquely make God and his ways known to us. He has not become mute since the Bible came into existence. God continues to speak in and through his written Word, enabling it to refer to him and not just to creaturely ideas or realities. The God of the Bible continues to speak his word to us through this gift of written revelation.

If God ceased to be personally involved and stopped empowering the written word to accomplish the miraculous feat of enabling us to know him, then God would not be truly known. We would simply have human and creaturely ideas about God to consider and nothing more. The result would likely be not much better than the ancient Greek and Roman mythological gods.

Inspired by the Spirit

If we ask, "How has God spoken and made himself known to us?" it turns out that this work involves the whole of God, that is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The word "inspired" means "God breathed." The Holy Spirit is identified as the wind or breath of God. By the Spirit of God, certain people down through the ages were called, appointed and specially enabled to speak authoritatively for God. They were "inbreathed" by the Spirit. *How* exactly the Spirit works we do not and cannot know. But we have been told that the Spirit can and has empowered first the prophets of the Old Testament and then the apostles of the New Testament.

The Spirit seems to take into account everything about a particular prophetic or apostolic author and graciously makes use of them. The Spirit incorporates their language, culture and social-political background as well as their own relationship with God into his communicative purposes. The Spirit uses the human elements of the selected prophets and apostles. But the Spirit uses these elements in a way that enables them to refer far beyond creaturely realities. The Spirit takes charge of them in a way that gives those words a capacity to communicate that they could never have on their own.

So by the Spirit, Scripture as a whole serves as a written form of communication that God can continually use to make himself and his ways known to his people down through the ages. If the Spirit was not at work with these individuals, we would not have any authoritative and trustworthy access to God's word. So we can thank God for choosing certain individuals down through the ages and, by his Spirit, inspiring

them to speak faithfully for him.

Providential Preservation

We have these written words because they have somehow been preserved for us down through the ages. This too must be regarded as the gracious work and gift of God. Because of his great love for us the God of the Bible not only kicked things off by selecting and inspiring certain individuals, but also by overseeing them being handed on and finally collected together. We call this form of God's grace his providence.

Apparently an aspect of God's providential oversight also included some inspired editing of preexisting material. God providentially maintained contact with his written word and with the process by which it was canonized (brought together in an authoritative collection). Of course if the God of the Bible wanted us to have a written witness to his Word, then we shouldn't be surprised that God would also have to anticipate and secure its preservation down through the ages (you do, after all, have to be pretty smart to be God!).

The Self-Revelation

The gracious gift of revelation as it traces through history does reach a crucial high-point. All the prophetic words prepare for and look forward to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. And all the apostolic writings look back to the time and place where God himself, as himself, reveals and interprets himself in and through Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, we don't have simply another inspired word about God, but the Living Word of God himself, in person—in time and space and in flesh and blood. So Jesus tells us that he is, himself, the Way, the Truth and the Life. He does not show us a way or tell us about the truth or give us things that lead to life. He himself is these things. Thus God's gracious revelatory work reaches a qualitatively different level with the birth of the Word of God in human form. And, as it turns out, the written word of God's Spirit-inspired prophets and apostles point to the fulfillment of their own word with the coming of the Living Word.

John the Baptist, as the last of the prophets and representative of them all, serves as an authoritative witness when he points to Jesus as being the Light, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Messiah and the Son of God (John 1:8; 29-34). John proclaimed that

Jesus came before him and is the one who baptizes with the Spirit. Therefore John said he must decrease and Jesus increase, for Jesus is the center of the center of God's revelatory work and thus stands at the very center of Holy Scripture.

Faithful and Infallible

The written word, derives its authority and faithfulness from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. Because God is the living and speaking God, we have a written word that puts us in touch with the Living Word of God, all by the Spirit. The Bible's authority is established and maintained by a living and real connection of God to the Bible. Scripture can serve as it does because it remains connected to the infallible God. The Bible's authority and faithfulness is not in itself, apart from God, but in its actual, continuing connection with the Father, Son/Word and Spirit. So when we read or listen to the Bible, we can expect to hear the living, triune God speak to us once again.

CHAPTER TWO – THE LIVING WORD

In the first chapter, we considered how Scripture is a gift of the living and speaking God. But this gift is not one that becomes separated from the giver. By the Spirit God spoke through the prophets and then the apostles. But God continues to speak by the same Spirit through those God-breathed written words. In fact if God fell mute, and ceased to actively communicate to us in and through those written words, we would not have a true and authoritative word from God by which he makes himself known. But the living and speaking God of the Bible does not remain at a deistic distance, winding up his Bible and then sending it out to mechanistically convey information about God.

The very nature of God is to communicate himself, making himself known, so that we might communicate with him as his children and so share in holy loving communion.

One further point, made in part one of this series, confirms all this. God's personal act of communication is in and through his Son, the Living Word. The whole of the written words of the prophets and apostles direct our attention to the Living Word, Jesus the incarnate Son of God. This Jesus is God's own self-communication, his own self-revelation to us. Jesus does not give us words from God, he is himself God's Word to us.

He expresses the very character of God as a speaking and communicating God. To hear Jesus is to hear God himself speaking to us, directly, in person, face-to-face.

So Jesus is at the center of the written word, Scripture. But he is behind all the words, the whole of the Bible, as its source, as the speech of God to us. He is the original Word and the final Word of God, the Alpha and Omega. In other words, by the incarnation of the Word of God the author of the written word of God has come into the play, he has shown up in the person of Jesus. And as the author, Jesus himself indicates that he is at the center and behind it all. So when the Pharisees attempt to use Scripture (and their interpretation of it against Jesus), he confronts them and says: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40, NRSV throughout). Jesus has to tell them that he is the author [Lord] of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5) and that they are in no place to judge him by their pre-understanding of the Sabbath. When the author of Scripture shows up, we have to stop interpreting Jesus in terms of our pre-understandings of Scripture and interpret the written words in terms of Jesus, the Living Word.

Through his interaction with the men on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, Jesus instructs us how to approach the written word of God. To help these disciples understand who he was and what he had gone through, this is what he did: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). A bit later he explained to them: "'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

The written word of God is to be interpreted in the light of the Living Word, for the purpose of the written word is to direct us to the Living Word so that we might know who God is and what he has done for us. When we approach all of Scripture with Jesus himself as the interpretive key to it all, then we hear the word of God as it was meant to be heard. Thomas F. Torrance used to explain it this way: It's like reading a murder-mystery for the second time. The first time we're looking for clues as to "who-done-it." But not everything is clear. Some things make sense others don't. Some things seem significant, others seem trivial. But in a well-crafted murder mystery there will be plenty of clues—so many clues that when it finally is revealed who committed the crime, we are

somewhat surprised but also satisfied that it makes sense. We say, "Yes there were clues all along. We just didn't know which ones to pay attention to and didn't see how they 'added up.'"

Now, what would happen if we were to read the murder mystery for a second time? Now knowing "who-done-it," those early clues would not be irrelevant. Rather we would see how truly significant they were. We would be able to sort out the irrelevant clues from the meaningful ones. Those clues would stand out as even more extraordinary. "No wonder suspect A said X. No wonder suspect B did Y." We would see what they mean; how they point to who committed the crime. We would end up valuing those clues as foreshadowings even more than on the first reading.

And that's much what it's like when properly reading the Bible. Knowing it all leads to what God has done in Jesus Christ, we don't set that recognition aside. Rather we interpret the whole of the written word in terms of its center, the Living Word of God. In that way, the whole of Scripture is properly interpreted; the gift of God is properly received.

Another way to say all this is that the Bible itself tells us whose Scripture this is. We know who the author is. We know where the Bible came from. It is not anonymous. So another analogy would be that reading the Bible is like reading a letter from someone you know and who knows you, not like getting junk mail from someone you don't know and who doesn't know or care about you. Reading these two types of mail are entirely different experiences, aren't they? Sometimes when I've gotten letters (or emails) from those I know well, as I read what they wrote, I can almost hear their voices. I know just how they'd say it. It sounds "just like them." Reading the Bible should be like that. The more we get to know the heart, mind, purpose and attitudes of Jesus, the more we'll hear his voice throughout all of Scripture and see how it points to him the Son, and to his mission as the self-revelation of the Father and the Spirit.

When reading and trying to understand Scripture out of the center of knowing whose scripture it is, another aspect of a proper approach becomes apparent. The primary purpose of all of Scripture is to reveal to us who this God is. That is, central to the message of all the biblical writers is to convey to us the nature, character, purpose and attitudes of our Creator and Redeemer God. They want us above all to know not just that some kind of god exists, but which God in particular and what this God is like. And they want their hearers to know who God is because the God they know wants to be known and is working through them to

accomplish just that.

But the revelation that God is accomplishing is not just aimed at a kind of abstract, impersonal information. It is knowledge that reveals a God who has created us for relationship, communication and holy love. Knowing this God involves interaction of faith, trust, praise, adoration, worship and so fellowship and communion, which includes our following in his ways; that is, our obedience. And this interaction is not just a "knowing about" but a knowing in a sense similar to how we hear of Adam "knowing" Eve and so conceiving a child. By God's acts of revelation, we come to know deeply who this God really is. Love for this God, the worship of this God, trust or faith in this God are our responses to who this God is. True knowledge of God that is accurate and faithful leads to true worship and living trust in God.

Throughout the Old Testament, the most often and widely repeated description of God's nature and character is his "steadfast love." In the Psalms alone, the Lord's steadfast love is highlighted nearly 120 times. Psalm 136 uniquely proclaims God's steadfast love in the refrain of all its 26 verses. An expanded but slightly more comprehensive description found across the Old Testament echoes what the Lord revealed of himself to Moses: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." The Old Testament prophets constantly held out to their hearers the nature and character of God, the only one worthy of their faithfulness and worship. However, the fullness of what God's steadfast love means does not come into full view until we see it embodied and lived out in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus with his promise to return.

Jesus himself made inquiring about and knowing who he was of paramount importance. His teachings and actions are designed to raise the question: "Who then is this?" His parables prompted his hearers to inquire more deeply. And of course, Jesus even confronts his own disciples with this question at two levels: "Who do people say that I am?" and then even more pointedly "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27, 29). Jesus himself makes the question of *Who* central. We must do the same if we are to hear the Word of God (Living and so written) as it was meant to be heard.

What is disclosed in Jesus and preserved for us in the responses of the apostles and their writings is that God is not just graciously loving towards us, but is Father, Son and Holy Spirit who have their being in

triune holy loving from all eternity, before there ever was a creation. Jesus is who he is in his eternal relationship of holy love to the Father and eternal Spirit. That is the deepest level of God's self-revelation, where we discover who God is in God's inner and eternal triune life.

So we should approach our Bible study with our primary goal being listening and learning from Scripture who our triune God is as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We can then rightly interpret Scripture out of that center. This approach means that other questions we might like to ask first, or about which we might be anxious, will be secondary. For Scripture, with Jesus at the center, not only provides us with certain answers, it tells us what the right questions are! So the questions of *What?*, *Where?*, *When?*, *Why?* or *How?* must be made relative to the question of *Who?* For it is the key to all these other questions.

We now have laid out the basic orientation for our understanding of Scripture and how best to approach it. We will consider some further implications for listening to the Word of God in our next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE – GUIDELINES FOR APPROACH SCRIPTURE

Guidelines for approaching Scripture reverently with prayer by faith

Since, as we have been discussing, Scripture is the gift of God, where God has graciously promised to speak to us through his living Word, what, then, are some guidelines for approaching it? I think the first thing needing to be said is that we must approach it reverently with a desire to be addressed, to hear a word from God. This attitude is probably best demonstrated when we start with prayer to God, the God of the Bible. In prayer we acknowledge that we look for and anticipate receiving a word from God himself, that is, hearing from the Living Word through the written word by the Spirit. It shows we are ready to listen, to hear. And we express in prayer that we want to hear what the Lord has to say to us. That is, we listen as his children, as his sheep, not as one of his advisers or as an engineer might seek impersonal information about some empirical object or law of physics perhaps to use for some other purpose.

In prayer, we also acknowledge that we depend upon the Lord and his grace to speak in a way that we can receive. That is, we listen by faith, as we trust that the Lord does speak and knows how to get through to us, the dumb sheep! Listening to Scripture as God's holy word is an act of faith in the God whose word it is. We read or listen to Scripture by faith in the grace of God, just as we do in every other response of ours to God. We listen and study Scripture by faith.

This means that we do not put our trust in our techniques for studying the Bible no matter how simple or how sophisticated they are. And we aren't just mining for data, for information, for formulas or principles or for truths that we can possess or use for our own ends or purposes. In prayer we place ourselves before the living Lord trusting that he will make himself known to us and enable us to hear and follow him wherever he takes us. Faithful prayer to the Living God of the Bible is essential for our preparation for listening to Scripture.

God's agenda, not ours

Second, listening to Scripture as God speaking to us means letting it set the agenda for us, according to the nature and purposes God has for giving us the gift of his word. This means that we'll come to Scripture not to give us, first, exactly what we're looking for, such as answers to our current or even pressing questions, but to show us what the right questions are and what issues have priority in God's view. We will not force Scripture to answer questions that it is not designed to answer nor give priority to some concern or issue we have that does not match with the priorities and central matters of Scripture itself. We'll be open to having our mind reshaped to reflect the mind of Christ and what he views as of first-order importance.

The primacy of the WHO? question

And what is the central thrust of biblical revelation? It is to make known the identity, character, heart, purpose and nature of God. Scripture is primarily designed to answer the question, "Who is God?" So our primary question in reading and listening to Scripture ought to be, "Who are you, Lord?" That's the first and most important question that ought to be on our hearts and minds as we study Scripture. No matter what passage we're dealing with, our primary concern ought to be: "What is God telling me about himself in this passage?"

We'll need to put in second place our questions of *What? How? Why?*

When? and *Where?* In fact, these questions can only be rightly answered by putting the *Who?* question first. In many church settings the most difficult question needing to be put on the back burner is this: “What am I supposed to be doing for God?” We are so anxious to discover what God wants us to do for him that we often overlook the most foundational aspect of Scripture which involves revealing, clarifying and reminding us of God’s nature, character, heart, purpose and aim. It’s far more important to know *who* it is we’re obeying, than to attempt to do the right thing. In fact, we can’t even accurately discern *what* God wants us to do, and in what way to do it, unless we act out of knowing and trusting in this God according to *who* he is. Only then will our attitude and motives and the character of our actions match or bear witness to God’s own character. Only then will we find that his commandments are not burdensome and that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. So we need to read the Bible and listen to preaching in order to see more deeply into who God is.

I should also add that the greatest and most damaging deception we can fall into is being misled about the nature and character of God. Being misled or deceived about who God is undermines our faith, which is in turn the foundation of our whole response to God. With our faith or trust in God undermined or twisted, all the rest will collapse too: our worship, our prayer, our listening to Scripture, our obedience, our hope and our love for God and for neighbor. Our faith is a response to who we perceive God to really be. When that is properly aligned, then the Christian life is enlivened and energized even under difficult situations. When it is distorted, we then attempt to run the Christian life with ropes tangled around our feet. So being reminded daily of the truth of who God is must be our top priority—matching the priority of the structure and aim of both the written and the Living Word of God.

Jesus Christ, the Center of the center

Third, as we do so, we’ll have as the center and norm of our knowledge and trust in God all of what Scripture says about Jesus Christ. Oriented to this living Center of the center, we’ll want to see how the Old Testament points and prepares us to recognize him. Jesus Christ is God’s answer to the *Who* question—in person, in time and space, in flesh and blood—that ancient Israel sought to know. In Jesus Christ, “What you see is what you get.” In him the whole God is personally present, active and speaking. Jesus is the interpretive key to all of Scripture, for in him we see and hear the heartbeat of God. We watch and hear the motions of his heart and mind, even his Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The light we find shining forth

from the face of Jesus sheds light on all of Scripture, for in him the God of the whole Bible has personally revealed himself.

So we ought to read and interpret Scripture in a way that through it all, in one way or another, we come to see how it points towards and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Think of this as a process much like reading a murder mystery novel for the second time. The first time through, at the end, you finally come to discover “who done it.” The second time through is a much different experience. You can see in a new light how all the clues early on in the mystery pointed to “who done it.” You appreciate the clues (and recognize the false leads) even more the second time through. But the clues are not the solution. Their value is how they indicate or are signs pointing to the resolution of the mystery.

This means that central to our study and understanding of the whole Bible should be the person and acts of Jesus. This calls for giving a certain priority to and focus on the Gospels. This does not mean narrowing our attention simply to the words or teaching of Jesus, as some “red letter” Bibles might tempt us to do. Rather, this means placing at center stage all of what the Gospels tell us about who Jesus is. This will include his own words, actions and self-interpretations (think, for example, of all the “I am” statements in John), but also make use of those texts that answer most directly who Jesus is, not only in the Gospels but also throughout the rest of the New Testament.

Who Jesus is in relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit

As we prayerfully begin to listen to Scripture concentrating on the *Who* question as answered by God himself in Jesus, you’ll find that the primary way Jesus is identified involves his relationship to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The answer to the *Who?* question is intrinsically bound up with grasping the nature, character, purpose and aim of Jesus *in relationship* with the Father and Spirit. For Jesus primarily and consistently identifies himself by means of those relationships. He is the one sent from the Father, the one who has been eternally with and eternally loved by the Father. He is the One who has the Spirit and who has come to give us his Holy Spirit.

The highest concentration on the importance of Jesus’ relationships with the Father and Spirit comes in the Gospel of John, reaching the apex in John 17. To know Jesus is to know the Father. To know the Father means recognizing who Jesus is. Interacting with Jesus means dealing directly and personally with the Father and the Spirit.

So in our Bible study and preaching we must pay attention to the quality and nature of Jesus' relationship and interactions with the Father and Spirit. For he is, in his being, the Son of the Father, one with his Spirit. Pay special attention to anywhere in Scripture where we're given insight into the relationships of the Father, Son and Spirit. For in those relationships we will see and hear most directly, personally and concretely who the God of the Bible is. And in returning to that living Center of the center, again and again we'll find our faith nourished and growing with a life of joyful obedience flowing out of it.

With the Center of our prayer, faith, devotion and worship set, as a kind of North Star, everything else regarding listening to and studying the Lord's Scripture gets properly oriented.

CHAPTER FOUR – RULES FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

As I said at the end of part three in this series, "With the Center of our prayer, faith, devotion and worship set, as a kind of North Star, everything else regarding listening to and studying the Lord's Scripture then gets properly oriented." So now, let's explore some of those more general implications that can be expressed as certain kinds of rules, which keep us navigating in alignment with our North Star.

Interpret Parts in Light of the Whole

As you know, Jesus is identified in Scripture as the First One and as the Last One. He is also identified as the living Word of God or the *Logos* of God. We could say that Jesus is and speaks both the first word to creation and is and has the last word about creation. Everything was set in motion by him and the ultimate destiny of everything is established in relationship to him, its rightful inheritor.

Perhaps we don't often think of it, but recognizing this about Jesus, our risen and ascended Lord, has implications for our hearing and studying of Scripture. In the past it has been put this way: always interpret the various parts of Scripture (verses, paragraphs, chapters, books, etc.) in terms of the whole of Scripture. No part of Scripture ought to be understood simply on its own, but only in the context of the whole. Some

have said that every part of Scripture ought to be interpreted in terms of the fullness of its meaning (its *sensus plenior*).

You may have heard the good advice to not take verses “out of context.” That’s right. The context includes not only the verses immediately surrounding a certain text, but the chapter, the whole book in which it appears and, in the end, the whole of Scripture. Many false teachings down through the ages and even in our contemporary situation come from taking a passage out of context and then concluding what it means on its own. In reality we can then easily substitute our own context for the actual context provided for us by the whole of Scripture. Our context then becomes the interpretive North Star. So there is no substitute for taking a lifetime to study the whole of Scripture, that is, considering “the whole counsel of God.”

But the whole turns out to be not just all the books and verses of the Bible. It turns out that the whole includes Who is before, behind, surrounding and standing at the end of Scripture. This whole is what the Bible says as a whole about who God is. As the *Logos* of all things, including Scripture, Jesus Christ contains it all. So the whole involves all of what we learn through the whole history of revelation preserved in Scripture. And every part must be grasped in a way that it contributes to the whole (of who God is in Christ) and how the whole includes the parts. That “rule” will help us properly hear and interpret the meaning of Scripture as we listen to its various parts, for it all comes from one and the same whole God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It ought to all sound like it belongs to one and the same God personally known in Jesus Christ.

Interpret the Unclear in Light of the Clear

Another “rule” often recommended in past ages of the church that will help us stay oriented to the North Star is to “interpret unclear passages in terms of the clear.” This is a good guideline. Much false teaching has derived from a fascination with the unclear, the obscure, or the opaque passages of Scripture. Teachers can take advantage of those cases because, given the ambiguity of their meaning, lots of meanings can be made to seem plausible. They’re not clear enough on their own to rule out a range of speculative understandings. So someone who can give a logical argument can often be persuasive, often actually reading in their own meaning. The rule to make use of clear passages to sort through the various options for interpreting the meaning of difficult parts guards against this danger. We especially should not let the unclear passages, and some particular understanding of them, be used to reinterpret the

clearer passages!

But we can take this rule a step farther. Who or what is the clearest expression of the heart, mind, will and character of God? Jesus Christ. He is the Light of all light. All Scripture, in the end, should be understood in his clear Light. He alone shows us the face of God in person.

Let's look at an example. The Pharisees of New Testament times had an understanding of God's Law, the Torah. When Jesus came along they accused him of violating what they considered the highest priority of that Law, namely the keeping of the Sabbath. And they had worked out logically what must be implied in keeping the Sabbath. They interpreted Jesus and his actions in terms of their pre-understanding of the Law of God. How did Jesus respond to their accusations? Did he simply say, "I came to give you another interpretation of how the Law should be applied"? No, he said, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8). The Pharisees gave priority to their understanding of the Law, and interpreted Jesus in terms of it. But Jesus countered by telling them who he was in relationship to the Law and so said, "I created the Law, I gave it its meaning, I know how it is to be honored and when it is being violated. Interpret the Law in terms of me, its Lord, not me in terms of the Law. It is my servant. I am not its servant, to be judged by it."

So Jesus puts the Pharisees at a crisis point. Will they recognize Jesus as the Living Lord, the Lord of the Law or will they continue to use the Law as "lord" to interpret and judge Jesus? What or who is the whole and what or who is the part? What or who is the clear and what is relatively obscure? We may not regard the Law as the Pharisees did, but we may have other truths or attitudes or viewpoints that we assume and use to interpret or understand Jesus and who God is. Recognizing Jesus as the Center of the center will challenge us to view everything in terms of his interpretation of things, in his light.

We can sum up: we interpret the parts in terms of the whole and the unclear in terms of the clear, and all in terms of Jesus Christ!

Interpret the Old Testament in Light of the New

Another implication that has been identified in the past is to interpret the Old Testament in terms of the New Testament. This too is a good "rule" we can follow and further expand. Jesus is the fulfillment of the revelation and provision of God. That is, he is the self-revelation and the

self-giving of God for us and for our salvation. He fulfills all the promises of God set up and signaled in the Old Testament. The promises are to be understood in terms of the fulfillment, not the other way around.

But the Old Testament is about more than the promises themselves. It involves an ongoing relationship and interaction of God with Israel over roughly a thousand years, including interaction with numerous prophets at various points in the history of that relationship. God was taking Israel somewhere and Israel knew it. God had not given them the final word. They looked forward to having his Spirit poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28) being given to reignite life in the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:5) and having new hearts (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). They looked forward to the time of God's peace or shalom when they wouldn't have to prepare for war anymore and not have blood on their hands (Isiah 2:4; Joel 3:10; Micah 4:3). They anticipated the completion of the sacrificial worship where they could be in the very presence of the living God and then truly live! The Old Testament revelation included the proclamation that there was much more to come, that God was not finished making himself known and providing everything for them. Even at the conclusion of the last words of the prophets, they knew they were not at the end of the story. The climax had not yet been reached.

The fact that God's revelation involves a history of interacting with Israel and speaking through selected prophets means that we should interpret any passage in terms of where it comes in the story as it leads up to or down from God's self-revelation and self-giving in Jesus Christ. This rule of interpretation is especially important for particular ethical or liturgical directives given to ancient Israel. What God commands of Israel in a particular instance is not God's final or eternal word.

For instance while the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" saying was far more compassionate than the code of revenge practiced by the surrounding ancient near eastern cultures of the time, it was not God's final word to his people. Rather, the final word is embodied in Christ who loved his enemies to the end and directed us to do the same. So interpretation should take into account where in the story we find the actions, attitude or instructions given. God fills out and clarifies his revelation through a history of interaction with his people, so not every word in the Bible is God's last word on the subject. Providentially, there are many places in the New Testament where significant change or discontinuity, is explicitly spelled out, such as keeping of the Sabbath.

This does not mean that everything said in the Old Testament will

necessarily be radically reinterpreted later on. Some insight or instruction may remain largely unchanged, such as principles we identify as broad moral instructions that are linked to our human nature and take into consideration our fallen condition. About rather permanent and universal features of humanity such as marriage, sexual morality and the relations of parents and children that abide throughout history and across differing cultural contexts, we would expect significant continuity of teaching. The New Testament often does spell out particular continuities and redemptive development of expression.

Even if there are some practical or particular differences, at the level of fundamental principles that reflect God's character we should expect to see some continuity between earlier and later application of that same principle in the New Testament. There seems to be a redemptive development in the way God's more general purposes are to be applied in the life of the church after the fulfillment of God's will is accomplished in Christ as compared to before this fulfillment. An example would be that although Israel is directed at times to go to war, she was instructed not to be vengeful and to look forward to a time when her swords would be beaten into plowshares. The Christian church is called to continue along that trajectory to finally be peacemakers and to not regard any human being as their ultimate enemy, but rather forgive and seek reconciliation and restoration.

The issue of slavery seems to fall along the same lines. What was allowed to Israel is no longer to characterize the Christian church. So Paul directed Philemon to emancipate his slave Onesimus (Philemon 16-17). Slavery is a practice that was "passing away." So such instructions as were given Israel cannot be directly picked up by the church now with no regard for our occupying a different place in the story than was ancient Israel. The God of the Bible is a God of life, not death; a God of freedom, not slavery; a God of love, reconciliation and redemption and not enmity and revenge. While we certainly can find signs of these characteristics in the Old Testament, at times some significant ambiguity appears along the way in God's history of interaction with Israel. We now, however, live to bear witness to the clear and complete fulfillment of God's Word in Christ, not to its foreshadowing and preparation. In this way, we interpret the Old Testament in terms of the New.

There we have several guidelines for properly interpreting Scripture with Jesus Christ the Living Word at the center of the Written Word. In the next two chapters we'll continue to offer some more guidelines to help us stay oriented to our North Star.

CHAPTER FIVE – REALITY AND THE MEANING OF SCRIPTURE

This next-to-last chapter covers several more aspects of listening to, studying and interpreting Scripture that honors its God-given nature and purpose. As we examine these, perhaps we'll find some bad habits that need to be unlearned.

Discovering the Meaning That Is There

Often when we hear Scripture read or preached or study it for ourselves, we approach it thinking we're going to "try to make sense of it." But I don't think that's really the best way to put it. Rather, we come to realize that as God speaks to us in Scripture it reads us, it makes sense of us! God's Word sheds light on our lives. God's Word is living and active and not a passive collection of data that we probe, organize, arrange and apply and then announce what we've made of it. Rather, as we listen to Scripture, we are acted upon by the Word and the Spirit. It comes with its own meaning and sense. So, we don't give it meaning and make sense of it. We *discover* its meaning and sense.

Listening to and studying Scripture is a matter of discovery, not creativity, innovation or theorizing. So hearing Scripture in a way that fosters faith calls for a receptiveness on our part, allowing it to tell us. We do not sit in critical judgment upon it, deciding ahead of time what we will or won't hear or whether we will or won't live by it. St. Augustine long ago realized there was a huge difference in approaching Scripture as *users* compared to being *receivers* who are prepared to enjoy and live under the Word we hear. He advised, just like the book of James does, that we take the posture of hearers of the Word of God, receiving and even delighting in it.

Receptivity, the Proper Subjectivity

We don't have to guess or sort through a lot of hypothetical options to discover what particular attitude of receptivity we should have towards God's Word. First, Jesus, in his own responsiveness to his Father and the Spirit, demonstrates the proper personal and internal (subjective) orientation we are to have to the Word. Second, the apostles whom Jesus chose, including Paul, embodied the spirit of responsiveness that reflected Jesus' own receptivity. These apostles were not chosen merely

because they could be relied upon to convey accurate information (facts). They were appointed because they had the right kind of receptivity (subjective orientation) to the truth that they were given. If we are to hear the Word of God, we must stand in their place, taking up their attitude of receptivity. We have to have ears to hear in order to grasp what they are saying—to hear what they heard.

Often we think that the biblical revelation given to us by its authors is simply a collection of data, information that sits objectively there on the page, neutrally and in that sense objectively (we say). We then take over that “data,” mining it for ourselves with whatever subjective orientation we please, including the attempt to rid ourselves of any subjective element at all. But the biblical preservers of revelation do not simply offer objective information that we then decide how or whether to appropriate or receive. No, the biblical revelation includes the revelation of the nature of its own proper receptivity, its own orientation and attitude. And that subjective aspect is embodied in Jesus and his apostles and is also conveyed in their preserved writings. Revelation as revelation cannot be gained apart from this particular kind of receptivity because it is included in it.

And this subjective orientation is not neutral or abstractly objective. The receptive orientation of the biblical writers is one of trust, readiness to repent, a desire for reconciliation and confidence in the power and faithfulness of God to redeem, renew and put right all things. Revelation itself includes both objective and subjective elements perfectly coordinated with each other. How the revelation is received is perfectly harmonized with what is revealed. In fact, the revelation cannot be grasped at all except in and through that particular subjective orientation. God does not approach us neutrally, but passionately and redemptively. So we cannot approach God neutrally and dispassionately if we are to really receive the content and benefits of his revealed redemption. And that receptivity which is resident in Jesus and resonant in the apostles is given to us as a gift of the Spirit so that we might receive the revelation of God that the apostles of Jesus Christ passed on to the whole church for all time.

The False Objectivity of Abstract Thinking

So much of the information we get, some of which is called scientific, is abstract. It is disconnected from the source of the information, from the object being investigated. Such input can seem to be simply words, concepts, ideas, principles or numbers and mathematical formulas.

Sometimes the information comes to us as a line of argument made up of a chain of logical connections. To use an analogy, it would be like studying the wake made by a boat that has long since passed by, but not learning much about the boat itself—which is really what we want to know. Such information rarely helps us relate to or interact with the object, the reality itself, since it's only indirectly connected to it. We're looking at the effects of something, not the source or cause of the effects.

Often in Christian teaching we're led to consider evidences of something (the wake, the effects) but aren't directed to think about the reality itself (the boat, cause or source of the effects). For example we might be presented evidences for the empty tomb, or for the possibility of Jesus' miracles, but not give much consideration to Jesus himself. Following that path we may learn something *about* him, but we don't get to know Jesus *himself*.

This rather abstract approach is often what we get from "experts." Sometimes we are impressed by the knowledge and insight they impart. But at other times, their abstract information and principles annoy us and leave us cold. It can seem that such information has nothing practical to do with life. We suspect that what they are sharing is the product of overactive minds fueled by over-sized egos!

Though not always, this abstract approach is often characteristic of theological or philosophical thinking, which provides *ideas* or *concepts* about God. Doctrine then becomes a mere collection of ideas or concepts to believe in (or not!). This reduces Christianity to merely understanding Christian ideas—ideas undoubtedly derived from the Bible. But this abstracting and conceptualizing approach sets us up for the disaster that is common in modernity and postmodernity (two periods now existing side-by-side). The modern mindset tends to regard faith as bias that distorts any true knowledge of the reality. The postmodern mindset tends to see faith, like all forms of knowing, as governed by personal/subjective factors (such as race, gender, class, etc.). With this postmodern perspective, all knowing collapses into self-knowing, agnosticism or, more often, a knowledge controlled by the will-to-power.

A biblically-formed mindset acknowledges these barriers to knowing truth, including knowing God. From the biblical perspective, we fallen humans are seen as idolaters who create gods in our own image in order to justify ourselves and our own kind. The prophets of Israel spoke out against this idolatry, which is our attempt to recreate God in our own

image or images that we can control and use. The golden calf in Moses' time is an example. All of Scripture teaches that God cannot be found by sheer human effort and that we will only end up deluded by the results of such misguided efforts. Jesus declared, "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son" (Matthew 11:27). As the early church used to put it: "Only God knows God." But that does not mean God cannot be known, for it does not rule out God's being smart and motivated enough to figure out how to make himself known. So the early church saying went on: "And only God reveals God." And that is what Jesus goes on to say, "...and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

The God of the Bible can and wants to make himself known. He's the Good Shepherd who knows how to get through to the dumb sheep. God's act of self-revelation is required if we are to know God himself, personally and deeply (*epignosis* is the Greek word used in the New Testament, parallel to Adam "knowing" his wife Eve).

Revelation, especially the *self*-revelation of God in Christ, that was borne witness to by Jesus' personally selected apostles and the working of the Spirit, can't be approached in either the modern or postmodern way, by either eliminating the subjective element or declaring that it always in every case hides or distorts the truth. Knowing God in his act of self-revelation calls for a particular subjective orientation that correlates with the nature and purpose of the revelation, namely being reconciled to God. It calls for humility and a mustard seed's worth of faith/trust to get the ball rolling. We have to be willing to orient our ways of knowing, both its objective and subjective elements, to the nature of the revelation. Knowing God calls for a readiness to repent and a desire to be reconciled to God. God's self-revelation rules out the twin errors of either attempting to remove all subjectivity (a false objectivity) or assuming that any subjective stance we might prefer would suffice (a false subjectivity).

Listening in this way to the Living Word through the Written Word by the Spirit puts us into contact with the reality itself, with the living God. In and through Scripture, with Christ at the center, we're not being given information *about* God, but hearing a Word *from* God who makes himself known as Lord and Savior through the medium of those witnesses preserved for us. If we approach Scripture as simply a set of concepts, ideas or principles about God and his ways, we will be missing the boat! Scripture, by the Word and Spirit, does not primarily enable us to know *about* God or his will for us, but to know God, *himself*, in person. That is

the case because God is a Living God and a speaking God and has not become mute since the days of Jesus. Listening to and studying Scripture with humility and trust/faith in the God of the Bible is a vital aspect of our living in actual relationship, communication, and communion with God. If we miss this we miss receiving the gift of God.

Taking the Bible Realistically

Now some in the church and its various seminaries have attempted to correct such an abstract approach to the Bible by emphasizing that we take the Bible "literally." Their aim is to achieve a more "objective" approach. Others have recommended that we fix the problem on the subjective side of things by taking Scripture more seriously, more imaginatively, in a more narrative way. Or those seeing the problem on the subjective side might gravitate toward interpreting it more ethically (either personally or socio-politically), more pragmatically or with greater conviction, courage and commitment. While well-intentioned, these commendations seem to me to fall short of what is hoped for and don't align as closely with the actual nature and character of God's Word as we might think.

There are other theologians, most notably Thomas F. Torrance, who said what is needed is that we take the Bible *realistically*. When we listen to or study Scripture we are hearing from those who, by the inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus, are telling us about the *reality* of who God is and what God has done, is doing and will do. Scripture tells us about the nature of reality, reality we *can* have contact with and can access, for example creation, and also reality that we ourselves *cannot* directly access but that can contact us, e.g. the Living Word by the Spirit. The words of Scripture, then, point to, inform us and put us into contact with the reality of who God is and who we are in relationship to him and to creation. By them the Living God tells us what is the real situation. In listening to Scripture we are getting to know God *himself* because God is able to use, by the Spirit, the created medium of divinely appointed human communication to speak again to us through it. When interacting with Scripture, we're dealing with the "boat" itself, not the wake it leaves behind.

So the question we ought to ask in reading any text of Scripture is this: "What reality is this passage telling me about?" This ought to be the central and controlling question whether it's a historical event or a didactic teaching, a narrative or parable, a simile, a metaphor or symbol, a historical person or a hypothetical and representative character. Of

every passage we need to ask these questions: What am I being told about the nature of reality, of God, of human nature, of our relationship with God, of right relationship with each other? Of course by "reality" we do not mean simply that which human creatures can see, taste, touch, measure, weigh and calculate. Those features only have to do with empirical realities, part of what we call *nature* considered as causal and mechanical and impersonal things. But Scripture puts us in touch with realities that cannot be investigated by empirical means. The most important reality is the nature, character and reality of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit and what he has done for us in Jesus. These are not natural or earthly realities at all. The Living and Speaking God continues to reveal the true nature of these realities through his Written Word with the Living Word as its center.

Faith Comes by Hearing

How do we discover these, to us, invisible realities if we can't see them, touch them, weigh them or experiment with them? The answer is that we *hear* about them from reliable, personal sources or authorities. We encounter their objective reality through being told about them by those who know. We can know about things we cannot empirically explore by being told about them. By having ears to hear we can see with spiritual eyes (the eyes of our heart; Ephesians 1:18, Acts 26:18). Jesus' eternal relationship with the Father and the Spirit is an example of such a reality. Other examples are the prophetic words from Jesus and his apostles about God's future intentions for his creation, namely, that God will give us a renewed heavens and earth and that every tear will be wiped away by God's final restorative working. By means of hearing from those who know, we can know and also interact with creaturely and divine realities that cannot be seen and cannot be empirically discovered. Speaking and hearing can be an objective event that conveys to us and thus puts us into contact with a divine transcendent reality. By the Spirit, this encounter corrects our wrong notions and arrogant attitudes. We can know, love, trust, obey and pray to God himself, who speaks an objective word to us in and through his Word.

So we listen to Scripture as a way of getting to know and interact with divine and creaturely reality, not just to have correct truths, ideas, concepts, ideals or doctrines. By hearing we come into contact with the truth and reality of who God is and who we are and discover the true nature of created things. Taking all of Scripture realistically tells us who and how things really were, are and will be.

The Meaning of Scripture

Another connection that probably needs to be made, although it perhaps sounds self-evident when articulated, is that what the Bible means is the reality to which it refers. The words of the Bible point beyond themselves by referring to and, by the Spirit, disclosing to us the reality itself, e.g. who God is. The words of the Bible have their significance (they signify or point to) actual realities. So when we take Holy Scripture realistically we are in fact asking after the meaning and significance of the words. The words don't refer to or mean other words or ideas. The words refer beyond themselves and indicate realities that are far greater than the words themselves. The realities cannot be reduced to the words, but faithful and accurate words authorized by God through the Spirit can indeed put us in actual contact with the reality. We want to know what realities the words point to, for that reality is their meaning. We are not attempting to find or create or give meaning to Scripture or make the Bible meaningful to us or others. Rather, we're discovering the meaning and significance it already has as we recognize the realities to which the words point and, by the Spirit, put us into contact with. That's what God's revelation intends to do and can do, that is its meaning.

Meaning Beyond the Words through the Words

An implication of Scripture's meaning is that the fullness, meaning and significance of the reality exceed the words used to point to it. Even words that are indispensable for discovering and relating to the reality, like biblical revelation, can never substitute for the reality itself. The reality of God especially cannot be reduced to words, even biblical words. But those inspired words are not arbitrary or dispensable. They are the gift of God, the God-given means empowered by the Spirit to refer us to and reveal those realities. The Bible is like an absolutely unique and authoritative map that is essential to guiding us to our destination—which is not a point on the map itself, but an actual location in reality. So the meaning of the texts will always be found beyond the words themselves, although never discovered in any authoritative way except in and through the words spoken to us. That is why Scripture is indispensable to the Christian church, though we don't worship the Bible. We don't pray to the Bible and we don't believe that the Bible will, on the last day, raise us from the dead. The object of our worship, love and faith is not the Bible, but the God who speaks to us uniquely through his written Word.

Our own words (in writing, preaching and teaching), including our doctrines, ought to be evaluated by how well they point to the same

reality that Scripture itself points to. And we don't want to be drawn into arguments about our words or those used by others. Rather, we listen for their meaning—the reality to which they point—realizing that words fall short of the transcendent and divine reality itself. We look for the most faithful words we can find, often with the help of others, in faith hoping to add our non-authoritative witness and testimony to the reality that the words of Scripture point to authoritatively.

These points about reality and the meaning of Scripture are large overarching concerns. But if Scripture is taken to offer simply concepts or ideas about God, or if we think our job is to make sense of it, or think the meaning of the words of Scripture are simply other words or ideas, we'll go off in an unhelpful and confusing direction that will not easily contribute to our faith relationship with its Giver.

There are still a few more detailed, nitty-gritty suggestions we can touch on to wrap up this booklet on listening to and studying Scripture. But we'll wait to take them up in our last chapter.

CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUDING PRINCIPLES

We now conclude this booklet with several principles that help us interpret Scripture in ways that honor its God-given nature and purpose.

The Written Form of Biblical Texts

God's gift comes to us in the form of writings that were preserved down through the ages in the form of written texts in human languages. To honor Scripture is to honor the *form* in which it is given to us not just the content. Thus to pay careful attention to the Bible, we have to take into consideration its historical, linguistic and literary forms. Our methods have to be able to attune us to the communication offered in those forms. But the methods used to engage the forms of communication cannot be allowed to take over and determine what we are able or are allowed to hear. That's how modern biblical studies and criticism have often gone wrong. However, we can selectively use methods attuned to the form of Scripture in ways that enable us to hear the words as references to the realities that disclose to us its meaning and significance. Methods that impose their own meanings and significance must be set aside; otherwise we are granting them final authority over

Scripture, placing our ultimate trust in them and not in the living Word of God.

What are some implications of recognizing the importance of the form of biblical revelation? First, a knowledge of the biblical languages can be helpful for those translating it into other languages (missionary translators), for those translating it into other historical-cultural contexts (pastors and teachers) and for those who equip others to communicate the biblical message and meaning. A familiarity with the customs, the culture, the time period of history and the original audience addressed at the time the various texts were written is also useful. A grasp of the various literary forms used and how they function as means of communication (e.g. history, wisdom literature, letters, gospels, apocalyptic etc.) also helps us better listen to God's Word. Much of scholarship is devoted to these elements of biblical studies. There are a number of good books that assist us in discerning the genre of the various biblical writings and how to approach them.

Methods Must Serve the Message and Meaning of the Texts

However, the methods have to always be in service of and subservient to the message and the meaning (realities to which they refer) of the biblical revelation. Whatever methods we use should not: 1) impede our hearing the message or 2) call into question the possibility of actually knowing those realities or 3) impose their own philosophical presuppositions on what we can expect to know or hear before we've listened, or 4) draw us into a false sense of objectivity (which promotes a seeming neutrality or abstract distance between us and the object of revelation's disclosure). Those methods that do so would need to be ruled out, rejected and repented of. For in those cases the methods have become our religion, our primary object of trust, the authoritative source of our most fundamental assumptions about reality. They will, in fact, have become the controlling reality and therefore serve as conceptual idols that make us into users of and lords over the Word of God.

And they may do this all under the cover of our assumed powers that we have and need for "knowing good and evil." (Just what the serpent tempted Adam and Eve to think they needed.) But such dangers need not rule out a proper use of methods that are ordered to the nature and ends of the good gift of Scripture. We honor the creaturely form of Scripture when our methods correspond to it rather than rule over it. And such methods will pay careful attention to the genre of the various biblical texts as well as the language and historical and cultural background. A

resource such as the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* provides such information to assist anyone on any passage of Scripture.

Whole Literary Units

Another simple implication is that the form of biblical revelation is for the most part conveyed to us as whole literary pieces. The books of the Bible were written, collected and arranged as whole pieces. Thus, harkening back to what we said about interpreting the parts in terms of the whole and the whole as made up of all the parts, we should always consider the whole of the literary unit in which Scripture was written and preserved for us to ascertain the meaning and significance of the various sub-units within.

Individual passages or even chapters should be interpreted in the light of the whole book and the location and order in which each verse, paragraph or section appears in the book. Failing to do so takes the parts out of context and does not honor the coherent form in which God has given and preserved his written word for us. On any topic, every book of the Bible must be taken into consideration along with its particular location in the history of God's revelation and in relation to its revelatory center in Jesus Christ. But that process must start by studying the biblical books as whole units written or collected and arranged as wholes. In that way we have many pointers, some clearer than others, guiding us to know and properly relate to the realities that God intends them to disclose to us.

Indicatives of Grace are the Foundation for the Imperatives of Grace

I have become alert to another bad habit that somehow has sneaked into our biblical interpretation that could use some corrective attention. We are often under conviction that the Bible is primarily there to tell us what to do for God or how to do certain things for God. This is especially true for those who have already become believing people, members of a church. This pull of being obligated to do things for God becomes so strong that often we are drawn into bad habits of biblical interpretation. We end up not really hearing the Word and inadvertently distort what we hear. We end up thinking God is essentially a taskmaster and we are his slaves or worker-bees!

The problem arises when we take something that is simply declared to us so that we might trust in its truth and reality and then turn it into

something we are to do, or accomplish or somehow make actual or real. In shorthand and using the terms of grammar, we turn *indicatives* of grace into *imperatives* (commands) of works.

For example, in the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), we turn the indicatives that tell us that God has blessed certain folks (the poor in spirit, the meek, those who thirst for righteousness and those who are peacemakers) into commands telling us to try harder to become these things. But Jesus was not using imperatives to command his listeners to work harder to do those things or to become those things. Rather, he was indicating what God already has done in blessing his people. God blessed some listening to Jesus right then and there. Jesus was then inviting them (and us!) to recognize and marvel at what God had done by his Spirit in his people.

A little later in the Sermon, Jesus does give a command—he issues an unconditional imperative at the end of the Beatitudes: "Rejoice and be glad!" Yes that's what we are obligated to do for God! And why? Jesus tells us: because God has blessed his people so that some are meek, some are longing for righteousness, some are peacemakers. God is a blessing God...rejoice and be glad! But when the indicatives of this passage are twisted into imperatives, by the time we get to the actual imperative in the sermon, we're too burdened down with guilt to even hear Jesus' command. Or if we do hear, we don't obey. "Right," we say, "rejoice and be glad. No way! He can't be serious after haranguing us like that—disappointed that we're not doing all that we're supposed to do." When we follow that faulty line of reasoning, taking what we think might be the "harder road," we've dismissed the truth of Jesus' message about the blessings of God and missed the actual response he intends to elicit from us!

The Ten Commandments in Perspective

I could multiply examples where people take a description in Scripture of what God has done or what he can be trusted for and convert that description (indicative) into an obligation or a command (imperative). This mistake comes from our anxiety to do things for God. The supposed commands are seen as conditions for getting God's approval or his blessing. But as you study Scripture, look to see if it isn't the case that underneath or behind every command there isn't some indication of who God is or what God can be trusted for, which supplies the very foundation and motive for those commands that are given. God does not need to be conditioned to be faithful to himself and his promises to us.

Let me give one more example. Let's go back to the Old Testament to the Ten Commandments given to Israel. Notice that it is not given until 430 years after God established his covenant with Abraham. It amounted to a promise: "I will be your God and you shall be my people." "Through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." But even Exodus chapter 20 does not begin with "Thou shalt nots." Note verse two: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." This verse indicates who God is and what he can be trusted for. It points out that the God who commands is the kind of God who rescues, redeems, sets free, delivers and saves! Why would Israel have an interest in other gods? Did the frog god do such for them? Did the fly god? The Nile River god? The cow god? The sun god? No, all the gods of Egypt became curses and led to death, not life.

As long as Israel trusted their God to be true to his character as revealed and indicated in the great Exodus, they would not even be tempted to turn to these idols, much less make images of them! Who God is in his nature and character is the foundation and the freedom for obeying his commands that follow. When this God is obeyed by faith in his character as revealed in his acts of deliverance, his commands are easy to obey. They are difficult and perhaps impossible to obey only if and when we don't trust God to be true to his character, the same character we see revealed supremely and in person in Jesus Christ our Ultimate Deliverer.

Look for the Indicatives of Grace Upholding Every Command of Grace

So the simple interpretive rule here is: always interpret the commands of God in terms of indicatives of God's grace and faithful character. Never grab a command apart from its foundation on the indicatives that reveal and remind us who God is. Whenever you find a command, stop and find the indicative of grace upon which it rests and then interpret them together. It should be somewhere nearby, either before or after the command. It might be the whole first half of the book, like Romans where chapters one through eleven lay out the grace of God and chapters 12-16 present the proper response to that grace. And certainly don't turn the indicatives of grace into an obligation of works. Doing so violates the form (grammar, in this case) and meaning of the words of Scripture. Don't let your guilt, fears and anxieties tempt you to turn a truth about God into an obligation to be laid on yourself or others.

Where Do Warnings Come From?

Another bad habit I have run into and been guilty of myself in years past regards how we interpret the warnings in Scripture. For some reason, I don't know why, when reading the warnings in the Bible many have the habit of thinking that it indicates that God has a mean streak (should I say "spirit"?) and wants the horrible outcome spoken of to come to pass. So we might be tempted to think that Jesus wants and delights in sending away those not prepared for the wedding feast, or that he wants the rich man who mistreated Lazarus to suffer eternally, etc. After reading a warning we often conclude, "See, we knew there was a dark and unforgiving side of God—look at that warning right there in Scripture! He delights just as much in punishing, rejecting and being wrathful as in saving, reconciling and restoring."

But what is the meaning, the reality of these warnings? How should we interpret them in the context of all of Scripture and in light of the character of God revealed in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? First off, warnings are not the first word God gives. Warnings come as the last word offered to those who reject all the other words of promise and blessing that call for complete trust in and worship of God alone. And they are mostly directed at self-righteous and haughty religious people, not those who are unbelieving and not a part of the community of worshippers.

And then, what is the purpose or aim of a warning and why would someone give a warning? The purpose is to prevent the outcome pictured from happening! It is not given to assure that it does happen. It is given because the outcome is not wanted, is not desired but to be averted. It is given to help the very one being warned of the danger. Warnings are a sign of love, not rejection. Perhaps it is the last sign given, but nevertheless still one of love. If God didn't care or wanted the anticipated negative outcome to occur, there would no reason for him to issue a warning at all. Why even bother! But, no, warnings are the last words of love to prevent the potential outcome.

Other biblical teaching tells us that God does not delight in the punishment of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11) and he wants no one to perish but to turn and repent (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus' own explanation that he came not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:14-18) backs up this understanding of biblical warnings. We have Scripture that tells us in no uncertain terms how God regards the unbeliever, the unrepentant ones. God does not take delight in seeing his good creation come to ruin. Warnings are expressions of love when nothing else has worked. They are not threats God can't wait to carry out. So we ought to interpret

biblical warnings in terms of the character of God shown in Christ and according to the purpose of warnings meant to prevent the potential disastrous outcome to those God loves.

Interpret Deeds in the Light of the Interpretive Words

And finally one last bad habit of interpretation to consider. In listening to and studying Scripture we can fall into the trap of interpreting an action of God or of God's people apart from the accompanying words that indicate its meaning. The revelation of God involves a Word-Deed event. Certainly, God does things and has his people do certain things. But the deeds cannot be understood apart from the word given that interprets it. Deeds do not interpret themselves.

The significance and meaning of a particular deed is revealed through words that explain what was behind that action. But often we read of God doing something, especially in the Old Testament but sometimes in the New, and immediately react and draw conclusions about what that deed must say about God or his purposes or mind. For example, we read that the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea or that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Or we read of Jesus driving out the money-changers from the temple, or cursing the fig tree, or warning those who have not repented, or instructing the disciples to shake the dust off their feet from those villages that refuse to welcome them. Instead of looking for the prophetic and apostolic interpretation of these deeds—seeking to understand what they point to and how they are fulfilled and perfected (brought to their right and true end or purpose)—we interpret them in the context of what we might mean if we were to do these things today (or perhaps what the worst and meanest person we can think of might mean by it!).

In making this mistake, we are substituting our imagined context for the biblical context and explanation. Although sometimes it's not obvious in every text, when the whole picture is assembled we find that the ultimate purpose of the text is redemption, reconciliation, deliverance—the salvation that is fulfilled in Jesus. Deciding on what a deed of God or his people means apart from God's character and words that interpret such deeds is another way of taking Scripture out of context—it is the grasping of an individual part that is disconnected from the whole. Deeds must never be understood apart from their revealed explanations.

While there are other words surrounding and interpreting for us those deeds mentioned above, I want to conclude by reminding us that Jesus Christ himself is the final Deed and Word of God. Jesus had to interpret

his deeds even to his own disciples for them to know what they meant. This is especially true of the saving significance of his death and the hope of the resurrection. Without hearing his spoken words we would not know the meaning of his actions. Both must be taken together.

Jesus, God's Final Word and Deed

In fact, all the deeds of God in the Bible and other prophetic words should be interpreted in terms of who Jesus is, the Final Word-Deed. The Exodus and Pharaoh must be interpreted in terms of Jesus and his revelation of the heart and mind of God toward all his human creatures. He embodies and explains his very purpose to save. As the Son of God and the Son of Man he worked out that purpose by assuming our human nature as the second Adam and becoming the new head of the race.

So even Jesus' own deeds must be interpreted in terms of his own words, not in terms of our own words/thoughts/imaginings. In other words, all his deeds or work must be interpreted in the light of his person—in the light of who Jesus is. Said another way, we must interpret his works in terms of his person. And who is Jesus in his being and nature? He is the Son of the Father, our Savior, Redeemer and Reconciler. That's what the name Jesus means—the name given to him by his heavenly Father. All of Jesus' deeds indicate who he is as the eternal Son of the Father, become our Brother, Lord and Servant King in order to make us his beloved children. As God's final word and deed, Jesus is the key to interpreting every word and deed in Scripture—the written word belongs to Jesus and comes from him, God's Living Word to us.

This is exactly what was occurring when Jesus stayed with those he met on the road to Emmaus following his resurrection: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27 *ESV*). You'll also recall Jesus' admonition to the Pharisees: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40 *ESV*).

Interpretation of Scripture is the Church's Responsibility

There is one last word to consider before we end this booklet. The task of interpreting Scripture is not the responsibility of isolated individuals but the task of the whole church, involving its various members with their gifts and callings, including those gifted as teachers and preachers.

Proper interpretation of Scripture takes account of how particular passages of Scripture have been understood by many down through the history of the church and into our own times. We'll want to pay more attention to those teachers and interpreters who follow the kind of guidelines we have laid out in this booklet.

In presenting this booklet, I am indebted to many who have gone before me. I have not footnoted these references, but I could have. It is good to consult others before we make final determinations of what a given passage of Scripture means or what a collection of Scriptures add up to mean. We should look for precedents—paying attention to those who have been called by God to assist the church in listening to and understanding Scripture. We ought to be skeptical about esoteric interpretations that have little or no continuity with what the orthodox church as a whole has historically understood. This does not mean that deeper understanding could not be obtained as we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. But that understanding should be deeper and fuller than what has gone before, not a departure or wholesale discount of it.

God has many laborers working by faith to understand Scripture. We must not be so arrogant as to think that we alone, individually, can have an independent and final say. While the approach advocated in this booklet will not guarantee uniformity of interpretation throughout the church, it will help us avoid falling into traps, especially those already identified centuries ago! God gives his Word and his Spirit to the Church as a whole. We must not despise others who approach it with the same honor with which we regard it, for in doing so we would be rejecting some of the good gifts that God has given to the church in the past for our benefit today.

With those words then, I end this booklet with the hope that more questions have been answered than raised; more light shed than heat generated.

May the Lord himself sanctify all these words to you. Amen.

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If You Want to Know More...

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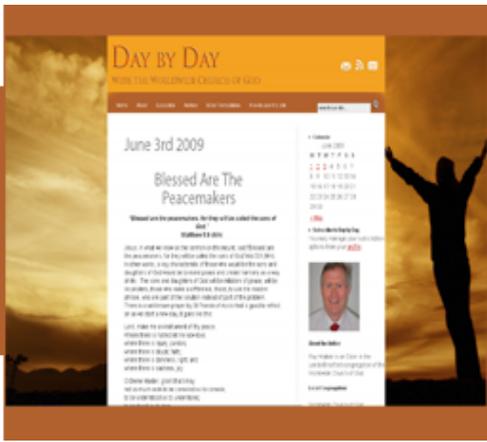
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